



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 7 February 2024

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Georgie Crozier

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Bach, Matthew ¹	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Luu, Trung	Western Metropolitan	Lib
Batchelor, Ryan	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Mansfield, Sarah	Western Victoria	Greens
Bath, Melina	Eastern Victoria	Nat	McArthur, Bev	Western Victoria	Lib
Berger, John	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	McCracken, Joe	Western Victoria	Lib
Blandthorn, Lizzie	Western Metropolitan	ALP	McGowan, Nick	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib
Bourman, Jeff	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	McIntosh, Tom	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Broad, 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 ²	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 ³	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee	Northern Victoria	PHON
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
			Welch, Richard ⁴	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

¹ Resigned 7 December 2023

² Lib until 27 March 2023

³ LDP until 26 July 2023

⁴ 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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Wednesday 7 February 2024

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

*Papers***Papers****Tabled by Clerk:**

Municipal Association of Victoria – Report, 2022–23.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule No. 6.

*Business of the house***Notices****Notices of motion given.****Samantha Ratnam having given notice:**

Jeff Bourman: On a point of order, President, I am getting tired of hearing about this genocide stuff. My family were part of an actual attempted genocide.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Bourman, Mr Davis moved a similar point of order yesterday.

Jeff Bourman: This is just getting ridiculous.

The PRESIDENT: I would just remind people that members do have parliamentary privilege. They may say some things that some other members do not particularly like, but they do have the privilege.

Further notices given.*Committees***Economy and Infrastructure Committee***Reporting dates*

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (09:42): I move, by leave:

That the reporting date for the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's inquiry into local government funding and services be extended to no later than 28 November 2024.

Motion agreed to.*Members statements***Rye infrastructure**

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:43): I rise to update the house on all the fantastic things happening in Rye. I joined locals before the break, and we cut a ribbon on the rebuild of the pier, which was absolutely fantastic. People are using it for walking, snorkelling and diving. So many people are out there fishing. It is just fantastic bringing people together and celebrating something so fantastic that the community and tourists have used through the summer.

Further to that, we have got the \$3 million invested by the government into the Rye structure plan, which is seeing the redevelopment of Napier Street and the promenade foreshore area, combining that and flowing into the pier. We are just continually investing in the centre and the heart of the town. Additionally, I caught up a couple of times with principal Lachie Featherston from Rye Primary on the investment the government is making in the primary school there.

There are lots of other of investments we are making that I am going to update the house on at another time, but it does not matter whether it is catching up with the community house and all the incredible work and programs being delivered there, Rosebud–Rye Rotary and everything they are doing, the yacht club or the bowls club, everyone at the bowls club – there is a big base of members there – there is so much happening in Rye, and it is great to be able to inform the house.

Black Saturday

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (09:44): Today marks the 15th anniversary of the Black Saturday bushfires that ravaged so much of my electorate of Northern Victoria Region. From Kilmore East through to Flowerdale, Humevale, Strathewen, Kinglake, Toolangi and Marysville up through Buxton to Taggerty, further north around Mudgegonga and around Axedale and Bendigo, communities across my electorate of Northern Victoria Region and the wider state were devastated by the impact of the fires. 7 February and the months following are a time that is etched in my memory, a time I will never forget, and I hope that no current or future members of Parliament have to experience the images and memories of loss of life and devastation of whole towns that I will live with forever. One hundred and seventy-three lives were lost on that day, and 414 people were injured in around 400 fires that burnt out of control, destroying families and communities, and most of the devastation and loss of life occurred in northern Victoria. I want to pay my respects to the families and friends of the 173 people who died in the fires. I especially want to make mention of personal friends Allan and Carolyn O’Gorman and their 18-year-old son Stuart, who lost their lives in the fires at Humevale, and I pay my respects to their twins, Patrick and Bronwyn, who were fortunately not home at the time of the fires. I also want to thank all emergency services personnel who assisted on that day, particularly our brave CFA volunteers who fought the fires, and all other volunteers, including SES, Red Cross, St John’s and so many others, who helped on the day and in the months and years after as communities have rebuilt.

Education funding

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:46): Last week my eldest child started prep, and like many public schools, the school he is at thrives because of the passion of the incredible teaching staff and the local school community. But this occasion brought to front of mind the extraordinary inequity in school facilities between public and private schools that this government continues to entrench. Geelong is a very good case study to highlight this. Private schools that receive public funding have swimming pools and equestrian centres in Geelong, while many public schools lack basic facilities like shade sails, air conditioning and IT equipment and struggle to fund basic repairs. A recent *Age* and AEU investigation confirmed that public schools are systematically underfunded while private schools receive way more tax funding than they should. Worse, the Victorian Labor government have been using accounting tricks to create the illusion of more funding than they actually provide. It is beyond disgraceful that this is occurring under the watch of Labor governments who purport to care about public education. Everyone deserves a quality education no matter their postcode or income, and it is time Labor properly funded public schools with real money.

Melbourne to Warrnambool Cycling Festival

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (09:47): Glorious weather in Warrnambool last weekend heralded the Melbourne to Warrnambool Cycling Festival. This includes the second-oldest one-day cycling event in the world and the recently introduced women’s classic. I thank Steve Dimopoulos as Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events for the tremendous support for this event. I am proud of the Allan Labor government’s commitment to women’s inclusion and the richness this is adding to the event, with more families coming to Warrnambool and enjoying the whole weekend. I acknowledge the road race committee and Shane Wilson for their hard work and especially for including the women’s race.

Congratulations to Mark O'Brien, a 36-year-old veteran – it is very sad when a 36-year-old is referred to as a veteran – for taking the win for the first time. Lucie Stewart took out the women's win after recovering from injury. She also took out the best young rider at 19 years of age.

I also acknowledge Team Royal Bikes, a new Warrnambool-based national road series team, which started in its inaugural race this year. The first Warrnambool rider over the line was Jack Aitken from that team. I think the formation of that team in Warrnambool is a great example of a spin-off from state government funding that supports the race.

Cape Otway Road Australia

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (09:49): Recently my colleagues Richard Riordan and Sam Groth and I were very pleased to join founders Daryl Pelchen and Olivia Tipler from Cape Otway Road Australia, CORA, to announce their amazing new partnership with legendary French tennis coach Patrick Mouratoglou. CORA brings together a wide range of elite sports wellbeing and training, and this particular partnership in Western Victoria Region will create the Southern Hemisphere's largest tennis academy right in the heart of our country electorate. Bringing together the best coaching and infrastructure from the French tennis centre, CORA will create extraordinary opportunities for young students and athletes from not only Australia but also the Asia-Pacific region. The world-class complex is set to be built 25 kilometres south-west of Geelong and will profoundly contribute to the local economy and tourism in the Greater Geelong, Surf Coast and wider western Victoria area. Congratulations to CORA. The team of Daryl and Olivia have been amazing prosecuting this extraordinary facility over many years, with many hiccups caused largely by government. But anyway, it is off and running, and I hope it gets to fruition very soon. It is a very significant, and internationally significant, commendable partnership.

Education system

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (09:50): Normally as a teacher I would be back in a classroom this time of year. Out in the western suburbs we love our families, so not surprisingly we are growing fast. Indeed Wyndham and Melton have the highest 10-year average population growth in the entire state of Victoria. It does not take a genius to know that lots of growth requires lots of school placements, which require school buildings and teachers, and teachers need training and support. So why is it that in the west we do not have enough schools, and the ones we have are so overcrowded? Wyndham council has over 1000 enrolled students per government school, which is more than double the average across the state. On average they have around half the number of primary schools compared to greater Melbourne. So I just find myself wondering: why does the west always get less under Labor? They have been in power in Victoria for about 20 of the last 24 years, and we keep hearing them bragging about their education record. In fact at one point they even changed our numberplates to 'The Education State'. In reality, Victoria has the most expensive public school education in Australia. We are straining under a teacher shortage so severe that teacher qualifications are now being lowered, and the decline in academic standards and the increase in student anxiety has families across this state, especially in my western suburbs region, devastated. Sadly, Victoria can no longer claim to be the Education State, but only an education in what not to do when planning for education as a government.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region citizenship ceremonies

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:52): Last month I had the privilege of attending a number of citizenship ceremonies and welcoming some of our new Australians, in particular at Knox along with my colleague the member for Bayswater and at the Frankston community awards and ceremonies, which were combined on 26 January as well. I was privileged to join my colleagues the members for Frankston, Carrum and Hastings, and Mrs Hermans as well, at that event. I do want to heartily congratulate all of the new citizens across the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Australia Day awards

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:52): I would also like to acknowledge Frankston Citizen of the Year for 2024 Alastair Leaver, who has contributed remarkably to the local community through his volunteer work with MSFIN, Mums Supporting Families in Need. Alastair worked to improve and transform the MSFIN operations in their warehouse. In addition to his efforts improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the operation, his dedication has helped increase volunteers at the organisation by 60 per cent. Congratulations to other deserving award recipients, including the Frankston Rotary Club and Young Citizen of the Year Kelly Gilbert, who is an inspiring advocate and role model for young people. Amongst her achievements, Kelly led Anti-Bullying Week at Frankston High School and completed 3144 push-ups in 23 days as part of the Push-Up Challenge to promote mental health. Kelly has also served as an executive member of the Chillout & Look About road safety campaign.

Docklands

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:53): There is a famous saying that the art of taxation is about plucking the goose to obtain the largest possible amount of feathers with the smallest possible amount of hissing. It is time for this government to wake up and hear the hissing. Several cruise lines are avoiding Melbourne because of the excessive fees, and as a result of this penny-pinching, Victorians are missing out on millions of dollars from tourists and the huge amount of business that comes from stocking these ships. Now, during a cost-of-living crisis, it has been reported that Costco cannot afford to continue trading at Docklands because of various fees and taxes. Costco is a fantastic source of bulk goods for people with big families or small businesses, and this will be a major inconvenience for many people. It will also be a hammer blow to Docklands, and in particular the shopping area known as the District. But it is not too late. We have the ability to save Docklands by creating a special economic zone. I urge the government to consider reviving this area by providing tax breaks on stamp duty, payroll and land taxes. Let us turbocharge Docklands and establish a special economic zone – before they kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Australia Day awards

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (09:54): Today I rise to congratulate 28 constituents in Western Victoria who have been recognised for their outstanding service to our community in January's Order of Australia awards. Foremost amongst them is the late emeritus professor William Hugh Sawyer of Point Lonsdale, who has posthumously been appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for his significant contribution to tertiary education and biochemistry. William instituted the early career researcher program at the University of Melbourne, where he had a personal chair and was the president of the Australian Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology in the 1990s, moving on to become president of the Federation of Asian and Oceanian Biochemists and Molecular Biologists from 1999 to 2001. Innovative prime lamb producer Georgina Gubbins has been awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia for her services to the agricultural industry. Georgina's service to the industry includes education and international food and fibre production, so congratulations, Georgina.

Victorian Premier's Literary Awards

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (09:56): On another note, I congratulate Warrnambool writer Rachel Morton, whose fiction novel *Panajachel* won the prize for an unpublished manuscript at the recent Victorian Premier's Literary Awards.

I congratulate all who have received awards and thank them for their ongoing contributions to Western Victoria.

Treaty

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:56): The road to treaty has been a long time coming. For those that have followed the journey through our ancestors, elders and our own lives, it really cannot come soon enough. However, just last month those opposite walked away in a complete U-turn that was never discussed with representatives of First Peoples or the government and leaves Aboriginal communities to pick up the pieces. The opposition has been driving division and fear on this issue at every opportunity. We saw it in the referendum, we saw it when the Leader of the Opposition ripped his support for treaty away and we see it in this place today as they continue their campaign to block the road to treaty. I am reminded that you must fight for what you believe in for today and for future generations of Victorians. The road to self-determination for Aboriginal people stretches behind us, and for the course to be stronger, and for a more just future, we must – we must – have treaty. The Allan Labor government remain as committed as ever to treaty, as we were last month. For our government, reconciliation through voice, treaty and truth is core business because we know that when we walk with Victoria's First Peoples, it means better outcomes for all Victorians.

School cleaning

David ETTERSANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:54): Victoria calls itself the Education State. This government is supposedly committed to a fair and equitable education system. A critical part of this is a strong, sustainable and supported workforce so that all schools can attract and retain the workforce they need. School cleaners are the unsung heroes of that workforce. They are poorly paid and only contracted for 42 weeks of the year, leaving them without pay over the school holidays. Their position will be further reduced by the recent awarding of school cleaning contracts in the west to Serco cleaning services. This will see their hours and wages cut by up to 60 per cent. This is grossly unjust for the cleaners and will doubtless increase the strain on our teachers, forcing them to take on additional cleaning duties and exacerbating recruitment and retention problems.

The obvious solution is to have cleaners directly employed by the government, as they are in Western Australia, Tasmania, the ACT and Queensland. Is it more expensive than outsourcing? In Queensland it has proven to be both cheaper and better, and it is the right thing to do. If, as the website spruiks, Victoria is committed to:

... a strong, sustainable and supported school workforce

and to ensuring a fair and equitable education system, perhaps the government should treat its school cleaners like they mean it.

Bills

Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023

Statement of compatibility

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:59): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, (the Charter), I make this statement of compatibility with respect to the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023*.

In my opinion, the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023*, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with human rights as set out in the charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview

The *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023* (the Bill) establishes a new legislative scheme to allow for the licensing and operation of one mobile drug-checking service, and the licence and operation of one fixed premises drug-checking service as a pilot.

The key elements of the scheme are:

- the mobile facility will be permitted to provide services at music festivals and events where there is a likelihood of drug use with the purpose of reducing the harm of that use through testing the composition of substances, the provision of information about those substances, advice about the harms and risks of drugs, health advice, referrals to support services and safe disposal of substances, to potential users;
- the fixed premises facility will be established at a location deemed appropriate through the licencing process that enables the service to meet its objectives of reducing the harm caused of drug use, also through testing the composition of substances, the provision of information about those substances, advice about the harms and risks of drugs, health advice, referrals to support services and safe disposal of substances to potential users;
- the Secretary to the Department of Health may grant a single licence to operate a mobile drug-checking service, and a single licence to operate a fixed-site drug-checking service if they are satisfied that the necessary preconditions have been met, including the establishment of internal management protocols for the services;
- the initial period of the pilot is two years with the ability to extend the trial period for a further four years. The minister is to arrange for a review to be conducted of the operation of the service, which will be relevant to any decision on whether an extension to the trial period is appropriate;
- there will be strong oversight of the services;
- during the trial period, some limited protections against liability will be provided to service users in respect of the supply and possession of a small prescribed quantity of a prescribed drug of dependence while the service user is at the drug-checking service; and
- the staff of the drug-checking services and licensee will also be granted protection against criminal liability arising from the operation of the services and, in some limited circumstances, so will the owner and occupier of the sites and the staff operating at the licensed premises sites.

Human rights issues

Right to life (section 9)

Section 9 of the charter provides that every person has the right to life and has the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of life.

The right to life is the most fundamental of all human rights. It is concerned with both the protection and preservation of life. Under international human rights law, the right in section 9 of the charter includes an obligation on the state to refrain from conduct that results in the arbitrary deprivation of life, as well as a positive duty to introduce appropriate safeguards to minimise the risk of loss of life.

The Bill establishes a service for people who intend to use drugs and others to attend in order to have a substance chemically tested for certain prohibited drugs or substances and information about the contents of the substance, including amount, purity or concentration of its components being provided to that person. Given that clients of the service may go on to use or consume the drugs or substances that they have had tested, the scheme has the capacity to engage the right to life. However, the object of the service established under the bill is not to encourage or condone the use of prohibited substances but rather it is one of harm minimisation. The state's obligation to respect a person's right to life includes a positive duty to properly and openly investigate health risks as a result of drug use in order to take positive steps to protect the lives of those affected and minimise harm caused by drug use.

The Bill's establishment of a drug checking service promotes and protects the right to life in a number of respects.

Firstly, the Bill takes positive steps to reduce the number of deaths related to drug use. The evidence of trials in Canberra and around the world through over 20 years of operation of such services has shown that drug checking services are successful in educating clients about the risks of drug taking, and in reducing drug taking and drug-related deaths. The Bill provides a robust framework to ensure clients get access to quality compositional testing of substances and timely information about those substances, including potentially unexpected and/or highly lethal substances or purity levels contained within, and easy access to drug disposal services. The service will also provide evidence based information about the likely effects of consuming the drug, including potentially fatal risks, and information about associated drug related harms such as dehydration, heatstroke and the potential additional risks associated with combining the substance with alcohol, other illicit drugs, and/or prescribed medications.

Secondly, the Bill promotes the right to life by improving access to drug and alcohol treatment, mental health and health education services. The Bill provides for internal management protocols that require the facilities to facilitate access or referral to appropriate health and support services (see proposed s 55ZC 3B). These

services include drug and alcohol services, drug and alcohol detoxification and rehabilitation services, medical services, mental health services, and health education services. This aspect of the Bill recognises that drug use is, first and foremost, a health issue that requires a package of tailored interventions based on harm reduction principles. By requiring pathways for referrals, the Bill ensures that people intending to use drugs are provided with the opportunity to engage with the relevant support services to address the choices and behaviours that pose a risk to their life.

Thirdly, the Bill promotes the right to life to the wider community by notifying the Chief Health Officer, the Chief Commissioner of Police and the Secretary when lethal substances are detected or a substance in amount, purity or concentration that poses a notably lethal risk. This enables the Chief Health Officer to issue public health warnings of a high risk and potentially lethal substance and other departments to circulate that information and implement any relevant protocols, which could also be life-saving.

Protection of families and children (section 17)

Section 17 of the charter provides that families are the fundamental group unit of society and are entitled to be protected by society and the state; and every child has the right, without discrimination, to such protection as is in his or her best interests and is needed by him or her by reason of being a child.

The Bill includes provisions that prevent children or youth from admission to any part of the services that is used for the purpose of testing of substances (see proposed s 55ZH (2)(a) and the procedures required under s 55ZC(3)(d)), unless otherwise prescribed by the Governor in Council via regulations. This condition engages the right of a child to such protection as is in his or her best interests and is needed by him or her by reason of being a child. It does not, however, limit this right. It is expected that the mobile drug checking service will be located at 'over age' festivals that exclude people aged under 18, thus the mobile service will not be accessible to children. In relation to the fixed premises drug checking service, it is feasible that someone aged under 18 would want to use the service. However, a child's parents, school, and the range of online resources from health and youth services are more likely to be the first point of contact with relevant information and advice on relevant drugs than a pill testing service. Children are also unlikely to access a service that will likely be located remotely from their daily routine of school and home life. For children or youth in need of targeted drug treatment there are already youth targeted treatment options, which meet the needs of young persons with drug issues.

While the Bill establishes an age restriction, the restriction can be changed by the Governor in Council (s 55ZY(1)(i)). This provision recognises the evidence indicating that often people take illicit drugs prior to the age of 18 and the harm-reduction benefits of a pill testing service may be applicable to this group. Therefore, the Bill recognises that there may be strong evidence to support lowering the age restriction as the trial unfolds, while initially excluding people aged under 18. We believe this approach is appropriate given the particular vulnerabilities of children.

Equality before the law (s 8)

Section 8 of the charter provides that every person is equal before the law and protects against discrimination, including on the basis of age. The Bill includes provisions that prevent children from accessing any part of the drug checking services (see proposed s 55ZH (2)(a) and the procedures required under s 55ZC(3)(d)). These restrictions are reasonable limits upon the right to equality as additional safeguards for the protection of children. The restrictions upon children accessing the drug checking services are consistent with other prohibitions upon children, for example access to the medically supervised injecting room, or the purchase of alcohol and cigarettes. They reflect the broader policy inherent in our legal system that children do not have full autonomy to make decisions of this nature, and remain subject to the supervision of their parents. Insofar as children are treated differently from adults, thereby engaging the right to equality in s 8, those limits are reasonable and justified.

As stated above, while an age restriction is established, the Bill also allows this restriction to be changed by the Governor in Council (s 55ZY(1)(i)) should this be considered to be in the best interests of children.

Right to privacy and reputation (section 13)

Section 13 of the charter provides that a person has the right to not have his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with; and not to have his or her reputation unlawfully attacked.

Clause 7 of the Bill inserts a provision that enables authorised officers to enter upon the premises of the drug checking service, to ascertain whether the Act, regulations, licence and internal management protocols are being complied with and to exercise other powers under s 42(1) of the Act. Those powers include: examining any room or part of such premises and any goods or records therein; take an account of any poisons or controlled substances therein; obtaining a sample of any poison or controlled substance which is in or on the premises. The exercise of these powers may engage an interference with a person's privacy. However, in

circumstances where they are conferred for and limited to the important purpose of ascertaining compliance with the Act, regulations, licence and internal management protocols, any such interference is lawful and not arbitrary and therefore compatible with the right to privacy in s 13 of the charter.

Proposed new section 55ZX requires the minister to conduct a review and authorises the minister to access, collect, use and disclose any data or information to complete the review. However, these powers are subject to the protections in the health privacy principles in the Health Records Act 2001 and the information privacy principles in the Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014. Accordingly, I consider that the provisions are compatible with the right to privacy in s 13 of the charter.

Rights to be presumed innocent (s 25(1))

Section 25(1) of the charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law.

The Bill does not create any new offences. However, the Act does create new exemptions to a range of drug offences under the Act. Proposed s 55ZR provides an exemption for a person who is a client of the drug checking service who supplies or possesses a poison, controlled substance or drug of dependence inside a drug checking service. Proposed s 55ZS and 55ZT provides an exemption for the licensee and staff of the licensed drug checking service if the activity is carried out in the conduct and operation of the licensed drug checking service. A limited exemption is also provided for the licensee, the employees of the licensee, the owner of the site and each occupier of the site. Pursuant to s 104 of the Act, the burden of proving any of the exemptions will lie upon the person seeking to avail himself thereof. The standard of proof is on the balance of probabilities.

Ordinarily, the presumption of innocence requires that the prosecution prove all matters beyond reasonable doubt. The creation of an exemption that involves an imposition of a burden on the accused to establish the exemption amounts to a limit upon the right to be presumed innocent. However, I consider that it is reasonable and justifiable to create exemptions with a reverse burden of proof in these particular circumstances. While the courts have emphasised the importance of the presumption of innocence, they have also recognised a special class of cases 'arising under enactments which prohibit the doing of an act save in specified circumstances or by persons of specified classes or with specified qualifications or with the licence or permission of specified authorities' (see *R v Lambert* [2001] 3 WLR 206 at [35] per Lord Steyn). The exemptions created by the Bill are to what otherwise would be criminal conduct. They do not require an accused to disprove elements of the offence; the burden of proving those elements remain on the prosecution. Rather, they are limited to the very special and narrow circumstances of the drug checking service. They are matters that are within the knowledge of the clients and staff of the centre.

Second reading

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:59): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

It is my great pleasure to rise today to speak on the pill-testing pilot for drug harm reduction bill, this historic co-sponsored bill from the Victorian Greens, Legalise Cannabis Victoria and the Animal Justice Party.

This is the first time in the Victorian Parliament that three parties have come together to introduce a bill, and it has occurred now because pill testing is such an important issue and taking this action to reduce preventable drug harm cannot wait any longer.

Importance of pill testing

Pill testing saves lives. It has been tried and tested around the world in dozens of other countries over many years. Here in Australia, Canberra is currently offering pill testing and Queensland is soon to follow. This bill seeks to introduce a pill-testing pilot here in Victoria that would run for two years with the option to extend further. It provides for mobile testing at music festivals or other events, as well as a permanent location that offers drug checking as well as more detailed analysis.

Pill testing does not encourage illicit drug use. Pundits will wrongly claim that if we offer pill testing to young people they'll see it as a green light to take drugs and that more people will take up recreational drug use because they'll see it as safe.

Pill testing is not claiming to make drug use entirely safe; however, research shows that when people engage with pill-testing services many will choose not to take their drugs if it's found that they are an unknown or potentially fatal substance. And others will modify how they take their drugs to reduce the risks. That's one of the massive benefits of offering pill testing: it's not just an opportunity to test drugs to see what's in them, it's an opportunity for prospective drug users to have an informed conversation with a health worker to discuss their drug use and what they can do to reduce the potential for harm.

And that's the whole premise of introducing pill testing, that drug taking is never completely safe or risk free, but we can reduce the risk and harm caused as well as the prevalence of overdose. Empowering people to make informed decisions leads to safer decisions being made, and with that comes less overdose, less ambulance call-outs, less hospital admissions and most importantly less unintentional drug overdose deaths.

We saw over the summer season many people took illicit drugs and ended up very unwell, some spending weeks in hospital. Thank goodness no-one lost their lives, but it's happened too many times already. Research from Monash University has shown that over the last 20 years 64 young people have died from drug overdoses at music festivals in Australia, and their deaths were found to be potentially preventable. These were young people, primarily in their twenties. They didn't expect to die, they wanted to have fun at a festival, made the decision to take drugs and often alcohol too, and tragically they lost their lives. We need to do more to prevent these types of deaths.

Pill testing works, to make people safer and reduce the risk of overdose and death. Telling young people that drugs are harmful and that they shouldn't use them doesn't work. It's never been enough. It is ridiculous that we're still just pushing the 'just say no' argument. Let's live in reality and acknowledge that people use illicit drugs, that young people will experiment with drugs, and let's do what we can to make sure that this doesn't send them to hospital or at worst end their lives.

Pill testing is widely supported by the community and medical and harm reduction experts. Around 60 per cent of people out in the community would like to see pill testing available at music festivals. They know that their children or friends or family members may take drugs occasionally and they want them to come home safe afterwards.

Five Victorian coronial findings have recommended that a drug-checking service should be implemented here following their investigations into drug-related deaths.

Almost 80 health and community organisations in our state have called on the Victorian Labor government to implement a drug-checking and public early warning system to reduce harms relating to novel psychoactive substances. This includes organisations such as the Alcohol and Drug Foundation, the Australian Services Union, Cohealth, Family Drug Support, Fitzroy Legal Service, Harm Reduction Australia, HACSU, LGBTIQ+ Health Australia, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association and Youth Affairs Council Victoria, just to name a few.

This is a hard-hitting list – doctors, alcohol and drug specialists, health workers, unions, legal services, pharmacists and many others, all coming together to demand action on this issue. We must listen to the experts.

Pill testing in action

Around the world there are drug-checking services in at least 28 countries. Over the past few years there has been an expansion of these services in North America to respond to the increase of fentanyl-type overdoses that are impacting many cities. This is something that we should be taking very seriously here in Australia and preparing for ourselves. In New Zealand pill testing is up and running with fully implemented services to support drug checking and harm reduction.

Research from Europe has shown some excellent results. Eighty-six per cent of drug-checking service users in Portugal and 69 per cent in the UK did not take their drugs when they found it was different to what was expected. More than half of service users in these countries consumed less of their drugs when they found out it was stronger than expected. This is harm reduction in action. It's proof that pill testing works and helps make drug use safer for those who already take their drugs with or without this advice.

And the results from Canberra have been equally positive. Over two-thirds of the people who visited the Canberra site in its first six months of operation had never before accessed information or advice on drug use from a healthcare worker. Half of the drugs they checked in this same period were found to contain substances that were unexpected by the service user, which shows how inconsistent the illicit market is and why this service is important for community safety. Canberra has issued two community alerts regarding harmful substances that they've identified through testing and one public health notice about a particularly dangerous substance. We need to know what is out there in the illicit drug market, and drug-checking services provide this surveillance and data.

About one in 10 substances brought to the CanTEST were discarded at the service after testing, and people were four times more likely to say that they would definitely not take their drugs when it was found that the substance was different to what was expected or contained additional drugs or inconclusive results.

Again let me stress, this service is working. It's empowering people to make informed decisions about their drug use, to modify this use and to reduce the risks.

Pill-testing pilot

To outline the details of the bill, it creates a drug-checking service here in Victoria with the aim of reducing drug harm and saving lives. Two licences will be issued by the Secretary of the Department of Health for a mobile and a fixed-location drug-checking service. These will both provide information on the substances they receive, harm reduction education, and referral services if required. The mobile service will go to events such as music festivals and offer on-the-spot testing and advice, potentially influencing behaviour before drug consumption. The fixed-location site will provide a similar service year round, while also being able to undertake more in-depth chemical analysis of substances and report instances of dangerous or new substances to the relevant authorities.

The licences will be valid for two years, with a possible extension for a further four years. A review of the pilot will be undertaken after one year, and the report will be tabled in Parliament.

The bill establishes governance and management protocols, including licence application processes, amendments, and revocations. It emphasises the importance of internal management protocols and a fit and proper person test for licence-holders.

The pill-testing service will analyse drug samples, providing information on composition, potency, and associated health risks. It facilitates safe disposal of substances and offers referrals to health and social services. An amnesty bin at the festival site would allow patrons to discard drugs without legal consequences and provide further substances for testing to increase our understanding of the types of drugs in circulation in Victoria including new or particularly dangerous substances. Drug transfers between mobile and fixed sites are permitted for further testing.

It is intended that these services will offer non-judgemental, factual advice on the risks and harms of drug use and how to reduce them. This will be available for people who might experiment with drugs at a festival, but also for more regular drug users who will have access to regular drug-checking should they wish at the fixed-location service.

The bill allows for the Governor in Council to set the minimum age of entry to the drug-checking service. This provides for flexibility for the services to be provided to those who would most benefit based on the data and experience of these pilot services.

To enhance harm reduction, the bill mandates the reporting of dangerous substances to health authorities and the police. It is intended that the chief health officer will be able to issue real-time public alerts about dangerous drugs. This will assist not only potential drug users but also health workers, drug and alcohol specialists and others to provide appropriate services and information to their clients.

Limited liability exemptions and protections are provided for service employees, clients, and the licensee in relation to the supply and possession of drugs within the pill-testing service confines, to safeguard them from legal repercussions. Outside the service, Victoria Police retains discretion in enforcing drug-related offences.

In addition, there are also exemptions from civil liability for the drug-checking licensee and the owner and occupier of the land or the service's premises, in relation to the services provided at the centre involving possession or supply of drugs or other illicit substances.

Conclusion

The evidence is in and now is the time to introduce pill testing here in Victoria. Every year we see more and more young people put at risk by taking party drugs without the option to check them or to speak to experts before taking them. I'm not here to claim that pill testing will end all drug harm or that there won't be any more overdoses at festivals or clubs, but I am saying that we need to do what we can to reduce harm, make this service available, so that people have options. So they can test their drugs, they can make informed decisions, and change their behaviour to reduce the risks of harm.

Alongside this, providing public health alerts when new and dangerous substances are circulating will reduce the risk of ongoing overdoses or harm from a bad batch. We can't be waiting weeks or months to find out what has caused an overdose event. With a drug-checking service comes information and warnings so that as many people as possible are alerted about potentially dangerous drugs in the community.

Again, this bill has brought together three parties who are all committed to harm reduction in Victoria. We want to make young people safer when they party. We want to see young people offered information and advice on their drug use. We want to reduce overdose harm and death. Pill testing can do these things.

I commend this bill to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:12): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for two weeks.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.

Production of documents

Port of Hastings

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:12): I am pleased to rise and move notice of motion 288. I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes the Victorian government's announcements concerning offshore wind energy and, in particular, its announced targets for offshore wind energy generation;
- (2) notes the 18 December 2023 decision of the Honourable Tanya Plibersek MP, the federal Minister for the Environment and Water, to reject the Port of Hastings Corporation submission, on behalf of the Victorian government, applying for approval for a construction and assembly facility for offshore wind turbines at Hastings;

- (3) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within three weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, copies of:
- (a) all materials submitted to the federal government as part of the Port of Hastings' application;
 - (b) all materials relied upon by the Port of Hastings and the Victorian government in preparing its submission to the federal minister;
 - (c) details of consultation/s undertaken by the Port of Hastings and the Victorian government with stakeholders in relation to the proposed construction and assembly facility;
 - (d) any consultancy report/s relating to offshore wind energy generation or the Hastings proposal;
 - (e) any environmental impact assessments of the Port of Hastings proposal or alternate proposals undertaken or relied upon by the Victorian government, including assessments relating to the internationally recognised RAMSAR wetlands adjacent to the Port of Hastings site and assessments in relation to the internationally recognised and declared Western Port Biosphere; and
 - (f) briefings provided to the Victorian Minister for Environment, Minister for Energy and Resources and/or Minister for Climate Action on the Port of Hastings proposal, alternative proposals or offshore wind energy.

This is a very straightforward motion. It is now well understood that the state government's offshore wind energy approach and proposals are in tatters. The government has staked a lot on offshore wind. We have no in-principle objection to offshore wind – we think it has a significant role as part of the mix – but what is important here is that the work is done to make sure that the ducks line up, as it were, and that the proposals are actually progressed in a sensible and practical way. This is a case study of a government that appears to have botched its applications to the federal government. In my humble view it would be in the public interest for these documents to be in the public domain. We do need to see how the government arrived at these decisions and what alternative proposals are available. I mean, people have mentioned a number of alternative locations down in the west of the state or Barry Beach and other locations in the east of the state. All of these proposals, you would imagine, are now on the table and being considered.

Equally, is the government intending to proceed with the Port of Hastings proposal in some deeply modified form? It would seem to me it will need to be deeply modified, given the comprehensive approach that the federal minister Tanya Plibersek took. I have certainly read the details of her decision there, and it is hard not to conclude that there was a proper process, that she did make a proper decision and that there was significant grounding to the decision she made.

All of this was potentially foreseeable. Obviously, the Port of Hastings is a significant port already, but there was obviously new land that was to be used for this proposal – a proposal that would have encroached directly on the Ramsar wetlands and a proposal that would have impacted directly on the biosphere. It is just very hard to understand how the minister blithely proceeded, and the presence of these documents in the public domain will inform the community and give those who are advocates for greater renewable energy the ability to advocate more strongly for those positions from a base of knowledge, knowing what work the government has done. It will also I think potentially expose the work that the government has not done and issues that are there in terms of deficiencies in the government's preparation for these offshore wind proposals.

There are obviously a raft of different issues to be dealt with here, but the simple, straightforward fact of this documents motion is that we are using the ancient and undoubted powers of the chamber to demand these documents and the government ought to provide those documents. If it wants to seek broad support for its renewable proposals, well, it needs to be direct and bring the chamber, the Parliament and actually the broader community into its confidence on a number of these matters. You cannot expect to see this kind of major change without this sort of information being in the public domain, enabling people to make informed decisions and those who are casting and developing policy to do that from an informed background as well. We think it is a very clear and reasonable motion, given the gravity of what has occurred and given the significance of the fact that Victoria's energy mix

is under some threat. We have been lucky this summer to date, but there is clearly a significant risk to our energy supplies, and offshore wind has a role to play in plugging that.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:19): I rise today to speak on Mr Davis's motion and to reaffirm this government's commitment to cheap renewable energy for all Victorians through offshore wind. The Allan Labor government is working diligently on the way forward with the Port of Hastings and Victoria's renewable energy terminal, and these documents requested will affirm that this is the same diligence we have taken at every step of our offshore wind strategy, including the Victorian renewable energy terminal. On the decision, both the Minister for Energy and Resources and the Minister for Ports and Freight have been working closely with the Commonwealth on the next stages of their Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 determination and will continue to work closely with the Commonwealth on each step required by this government's major projects.

Those opposite are requesting a range of documents, some already public. Like an expedition to find Big Foot, they are trying to find something big and scary which does not exist and trying haplessly to finally find something that will make us pull the brakes on the nation's leading renewables agenda, which is not going to happen. These documents will outline that the Port of Hastings was selected to be the preferred offshore wind construction port following an extensive multicriteria selection assessment. Through consultation with industries, developers and through international best practice, it was chosen as our preferred construction port. The Port of Hastings assembled an experienced team to prepare both the state and Commonwealth referrals. As for the documents requested around the Port of Hastings Commonwealth referral, I would direct you to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) referral site, which includes all documents submitted to the Commonwealth as per their reporting obligations.

On environmental assessments, the Western Port Ramsar wetlands form an important part of Victoria's ecology, and we are not dismissing this. We do not have to pick between offshore wind and the environment; the two can coexist through proper mitigation strategies and alignment between state and federal approvals and planning. The Allan Labor government has always found innovative solutions to problems, and we are once again getting on with a Victorian renewable energy terminal that balances the need to deliver offshore wind while making sure we address environmental concerns. Offshore wind is critical to rapid decarbonisation and fighting the effects of climate change. Through appropriate mitigation measures and offsets we can benefit from offshore wind generation, helping to free Victorians from coal and protect our climate without significantly impacting the local environment.

Under similar EPBC applications, the usual process includes a stage in which the state works through the Commonwealth's concerns, arriving at a solution that addresses ecological concerns while maintaining our ambitious goals for net zero emissions by 2045. Without this stage occurring, the EPBC decision was reached, and this is one of the key issues here. I know the opposition have thrown every review or report on this area at us and asked how we did not know. These were different projects with different purposes at a different scale. The Victorian renewable energy terminal is the first time that infrastructure like this is being built in Australia. It has specific requirements and impacts. No previous report or different project accurately addresses these. It is due diligence that we are given the opportunity to work through offsets and mitigations.

Victoria is Australia's offshore wind leader. We have worked to build strong investment interest, and we will have a successful multicompetitive auction for the nation's first offshore wind project. Victoria is absolutely doing the heavy lifting nationally, and because of it, developers are ready to invest in our country and in our state. Offshore wind is not just a nice-to-have, it forms a critical part of our energy reliability. It is also creating up to 4000 jobs annually during construction and 750 jobs during the ongoing operations. That is why we need the Commonwealth to step up in offshore wind delivery. A national approach is needed for offshore wind that aligns environmental approvals and regulation. Offshore wind is a part of our nation-leading renewables generation agenda, and it is not just

aspiration – we are delivering. In 2023 over 38 per cent of the electricity generated in Victoria came from renewables, more than three times the 10 per cent that we inherited in 2014. Can I just say, since 2014, 59 projects providing 4000 – *(Time expired)*

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:24): We have a proud history in Victoria of energy. Workers across Victoria, predominantly in eastern Victoria in the Latrobe Valley, for a century have built the generation capacity and have built the transmission lines that have powered this state, and they did so without fuss. They were well paid. They were able to support their families, that in turn supported communities, and that power drove our economy. It enabled us to power our homes, our businesses and massive manufacturing industries, like the automotive industry, and enabled us to export our products to the world. But in the last 50 years scientists have been warning us about the problem with this process. When we release emissions into the atmosphere, it warms the planet up. As that warmth is trapped in, it plays havoc with our weather systems and reduces our quality of life.

So decarbonising a carbon-intensive economy is a massive undertaking. Nobody is stepping away from the fact that this is a big problem, a big challenge and a very big task. Firstly we had to set goals of where we wanted to be with our emissions, and we were a world leader, setting our target of reducing our emissions by 50 per cent by 2030 and achieving net zero by 2045. We had to invest in energy efficiency to save home owners and businesses money and invest in and support our renewable industries so we could get the new power into the system. While doing so we have stood by workers who have given us our energy and our wealth in the past, investing in them to ensure that they can fill the jobs in the new industries that are coming. These targets, and this investment in skills and training and workers, is the work of a responsible government that acknowledges a problem and puts steps in place to solve it.

We know that inaction is going to cost all of us dearly. For farmers it is drought. The more drought years there are, the less productive their farms are and the less likely they are to be able to pass their land on to the next generation. For consumers – for every Victorian – when that food is not produced, the prices are raised and it hits all of us in the pocket. It is cost of living. And there is the devastation of fire and flood, leaving alone the emotional turmoil of having to leave your home and everything involved in that – the distress it causes for our community broadly. Then there are insurance premiums – people are seeing this turn up in their bills. The effect on the cost of living that is coming from climate change is something we have been aware of for decades and something, unfortunately, that those opposite have not been willing to confront for decades. Whether it is with state governments – trying to push back on onshore wind, on renewable energy targets or on emission reduction activity – you have been nowhere to be seen. It was the same federally – 10 years of just rotating policy that was not about implementing solutions, it was about cheap politics.

Last year we reached a 1.5-degree temperature increase across the world. We are ahead of the predictions of where we were going to be on average temperatures. We are ahead of ocean warming. We are ahead of ice melting. So we do not know where this is going. Eighteen-year-olds today are likely going to be alive in the next century. I do not like talking about the next century, because the problems are here and the problems are every year. We have got to implement the solutions to this problem in the next decade, because we do not have decades to use this as a political football. I am sorry – I do try to generally be respectful in this place because we have to come and have a contest of ideas – but it is cowardly for those opposite to have sat on their hands for two decades more. As I said, we have known about this problem for four or five decades. It is cowardly to sit there in the cheap seats and take pot shots at those trying to get on with solutions. If you have got a solution, bring it to the floor and let us debate it. Talk about the investment you want to make. Do not talk out the side of your mouth.

Come on: we have got tens of thousands of jobs and we have got billions of dollars of investment ready to roll in this state that Angus Taylor left sitting in his top drawer when he was in federal government for years. We have finally got the regulatory framework for a new industry in this country after you scrapped the automotive industry. We can provide the renewable energy – cheap, abundant

energy. We know that in Victoria we have got the cheapest wholesale rates in the entire country because we have done the investment. As I said before, there is 38 per cent renewable energy in this country. We are driving down emissions. We are leading, and we are doing it from government. There is a reason why you lot are sitting there in opposition – because you will not take a matter that is critically important to all of us seriously, and you are taking pot shots.

Motion agreed to.

Illicit tobacco

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:29): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that:
 - (a) since March 2023 there has been over 30 tobacconists firebombed in what Victoria Police Lunar Taskforce investigators believe is a result of criminal syndicates in conflict due to competition for profit derived from the illicit tobacco market;
 - (b) Australian Border Force deputy commissioner Tim Fitzgerald recently stated that ‘We can confidently say organised crime are involved in the illicit vape market’;
 - (c) in October 2021 the Minister for Regulatory Reform, the Honourable Danny Pearson MP, requested that the commissioner for better regulation conduct a review and provide advice on Victoria’s approach to illicit tobacco regulation;
 - (d) in March 2023 the *Herald Sun* reported that the government had received the report from Better Regulation Victoria, which recommended a licensing scheme for tobacco and vapes;
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within four weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, the final report, review of Victoria’s approach to illicit tobacco regulation, produced by Better Regulation Victoria, and all relevant documents related to the production of this report, including but not limited to:
 - (a) consultation reports and correspondence;
 - (b) ministerial correspondence;
 - (c) briefing notes; and
 - (d) draft documents.

This motion refers to a report that was requested in October 2021 by the Minister for Regulatory Reform at the time, the Honourable Danny Pearson MP, a request to Better Regulation Victoria to look at Victoria’s approach to illicit tobacco and how we might better regulate that. Apparently in March last year a draft of this report was leaked to the media, and it recommended a tobacco retail licensing scheme that might have some impact on illicit sales. But since that time, we have seen an explosion in organised crime around both illicit tobacco and vaping, which this report also refers to.

I do not hold the state government responsible for a lot of this – this is purely a failure in federal policy. Both the current Labor government and the previous coalition government have been hopeless on this issue. We know what the root causes of this explosion in the tobacco and vaping crime market are, and they are two things: the federal government has kept raising and raising and raising tobacco excise to the point where they have incentivised the involvement of organised crime, and secondly, they have refused to allow a legal vaping market similar to what more sensible countries like New Zealand and the UK have done. They have simply allowed organised crime to take over, as they do in all other prohibited markets. The solution of course is for the federal government to have a legal market for adults and to look at what they are doing with tobacco excise tax.

In the meantime, we in Victoria are stuck with the consequences of this. To my mind I think that the state government should be screaming at the federal government to consider the consequences of what they have done and what Victoria is being subjected to over this, because it is only going to get worse from here. To that effect I think it is very important that we see the final report and the associated correspondence and briefings related to it. I think it is firmly in the public interest to understand what

options were being put on the table and considered. That has not been released, and I urge all people to support the release of this report and associated documents.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:32): I am pleased to rise to speak on Mr Limbrick's motion in relation to documents surrounding Better Regulation Victoria's review of Victoria's approach to illicit tobacco regulation. People will be aware that I have spoken in this place in the past about tobacco regulation in this state, defending Victoria's great legacy as a world leader of tobacco regulation and tobacco control. In 1987, 35 years ago, this state passed what was then world-leading tobacco control legislation, which heralded a new era of significant change not only in this state but in this country and around the world of action taken by governments to reduce the harm from tobacco.

Why did we need to do that? Well, fundamentally tobacco cigarettes are one of the few products that are sold where the substance will kill a third of the people who properly and legally use it. The consequences of tobacco usage in our community are significant in terms of costs to individuals – illness, sickness and death – but also the broader costs that then has for all Victorians, all Australians, in the burden of tobacco-related disease on our health system. We should never forget that the consequence of the proper use of cigarettes and tobacco is to kill people, and everyone pays the price: the users and those of us who pay taxes and fund our health system.

So what can we do from a public health perspective to reduce that harm, to improve controls, to fight back against the well-funded tobacco industry, who we know for generations have lied to the community? They have lied to the community about the consequences of their products, and they have fought tooth and nail against every single piece of regulation that has been brought before parliaments here, nationally or internationally, designed to reduce harm from tobacco. Recently we saw the move that the previous federal Labor government made to introduce plain packaging, a fight the tobacco industry took all the way to the international courts – and they lost, as they should.

What Mr Limbrick is seeking today is some documents related to a report about whether there should be a tobacco licensing regime here in Victoria. That is an interesting piece of public policy that I think would make an interesting contribution to the longstanding traditions here in Victoria. One thing I want to take up from Mr Limbrick's contribution is that he said that there should be a legal vaping market here in Australia. I think that is absolutely the wrong approach to take. What we have seen with the rise of vaping in our community – I made these remarks in my inaugural speech 12 months ago yesterday – is that vaping is a Trojan Horse to get a new generation of children addicted to nicotine and harmful substances, and what we do not know yet is what this specific application of nicotine to people's lungs will do. We do not have the time to wait to know that it is going to do harm, because every other instance of people ingesting substances into their lungs causes them to be seriously harmed or die. People who suggest that vapes are less harmful than tobacco have been fed a lie by the tobacco industry, and we must push back against that.

The reforms that the federal government is bringing in in this country are the right approach – to ban single-use vapes, to move vaping into a therapeutic model where prescriptions will be required for therapeutic use and to stop the next generation of children being addicted to nicotine. That is exactly the kind of approach that we need to see in Victoria and around Australia. We should not follow the path of big tobacco that Mr Limbrick has been advocating for in this debate and in others.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:37): I rise to speak in support of Mr Limbrick's documents motion. It is a very simple motion. It is calling for greater transparency. This government has been sitting on this report for over two years. This is a massive issue. The government does not even talk about the crime – the firebombings that are going on, whether at tobacco shops or ice-cream parlours. Mr Mulholland has just said to me he is having one a week in his electorate – he just showed me a picture – in Glenroy, Fawkner and Craigieburn. These are communities that are being impacted by this ongoing crime, and the government is washing its hands of it, saying nothing. This is an incredibly important report where the government has done absolutely nothing. Yesterday in the lower

house the coalition moved a motion on this, and the government did not support it. Why won't they support such a simple thing to get on top of this?

Victoria is the only jurisdiction in Australia without a regulatory licensing scheme for the sale of tobacco and e-cigarettes. We have been calling for proper licensing for many years, and we took it to the election last year. You have done nothing. And now we have got these crime waves occurring which are terrifying communities, causing so much disruption to business, and yet these crime gangs are getting away. Taskforce Lunar is doing what it can, but the government is sitting on its hands. Release the report.

Mr Limbrick is absolutely right, and I totally concur with him. The documents motion also includes:

... but not limited to:

- (a) consultation reports and correspondence;
- (b) ministerial correspondence;
- (c) briefing notes; and
- (d) draft documents.

The Victorian community deserves to see the lot.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:39): I rise to speak in support of this documents motion, and in doing so I cannot help but reminisce about my question on notice on this very matter to which I received a response in December last year. I asked the health minister:

Will the Government release the Illicit Tobacco Review report commissioned by the Government in 2021 and undertaken by Better Regulation Victoria.

It was a simple yes or no question. But if you read through the government's response, you will not see the words yes or no, you will simply see a short statement that the report is being considered by the government.

As this document motion notes, it was in March 2023 that the government received this report. Almost a year later it is still under consideration; no effort has been made to make that report public. In the meantime the illicit market thrives, and I agree with Ms Crozier's discussion around what is happening with this illicit market and the firebombings. Tobacconists continue to be firebombed, and criminal syndicates engage in increasingly violent acts to compete for profit. Clearly there is a crisis on the streets of Sydney and Melbourne, and ordinary citizens are being caught in the crossfire. We know from cannabis that prohibitive regulations send demand into the illicit market. There, instead of money going back into government pockets and being spent on harm reduction measures, it goes straight into the illicit market, fuelling further violence and illicit activities.

Legalise Cannabis Victoria believes in harm reduction and the need for true transparency and integrity in government. We will support this motion, and wherever we can we will support documents motions. It is especially important to us that we lend our support in this case. We have witnessed firsthand a failure from government to respond to this report in a timely manner and to be transparent with its recommendations. Let this report into the public domain, and let us get on with the response.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:41): I also rise to speak on the documents motion put to us by Mr Limbrick today and acknowledge the comments of my colleague Mr Batchelor as well, who spoke very forcefully as to the importance of why strong controls around tobacco and, yes, even vaping products are so important and the insidious nature in which this issue has been fought by big tobacco over decades and decades and decades both here and around the world. Of course Mr Batchelor referenced the international cases brought by big tobacco against the former Commonwealth government upon its very successful implementation of plain packaging laws, which we were the first nation in the world to do.

I also will briefly respond to Ms Crozier's remarks that the government has been ignoring this issue. It simply is not the truth. As Ms Crozier well knows, this government has been investing enormous resources into Victoria Police and has brought in already tougher laws and delivered, most importantly, the extra police resources to tackle this issue. That is all as one small part of our broader \$4.5 billion investment in Victoria Police under this government. Add to that the VIPER Taskforce, which has already conducted over 6300 checks and conducted 350 arrests just in that taskforce alone. This government is on the record as saying that more work is still needed and we are confronting the issue head-on, which is exactly why the government has commissioned a review into the Criminal Organisations Control Act 2012 as well. I also note, speaking of reviews, that as regards these documents these reports are still currently being used to inform new work that will also inform improvements to the Tobacco Act 1987.

This is a complex issue, this is an important issue, and it is for that reason that the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, of which you and I, Acting President McArthur, are both members, has just this week announced a self-referred inquiry into vaping and tobacco controls in Victoria. I frequently talk about the work of the PAEC in this room. As with many of our committees, it does very good work, and I am certainly looking forward to this very important inquiry. The committee will be looking right across Victoria as well as other jurisdictions across Australia at tobacco and vaping controls to see what works, what does not work and what can inform improvements as well here in the state of Victoria. It is going to be a very important thing that we are looking at, and I really do encourage anyone who has their view to share, their experience or their expertise to reach out to the inquiry, to lodge a submission or even to put their hand up to appear as a public witness. It is going to be a really interesting look at this issue, and it is really important that we do hear from the community. So I would like to say to anyone interested: please do put your hand up, let us know, and we will be all the more grateful to hear from you.

There will be four things in particular that this inquiry will be looking at. Firstly, it will be looking at the trends in vaping and tobacco use here in Victoria as well as the associated financial, health, social and environmental impacts on our broader Victorian community. It will also be looking at the causes and repercussions of the illicit tobacco and e-cigarette industry in Victoria, including impacts on our state's justice system and effective control options. Thirdly, it will be looking at the adequacy of current state and Commonwealth legislation and regulatory and administrative frameworks to minimise tobacco and e-cigarette harm experienced in the community and how it controls illicit trade compared with other Australian and international jurisdictions. Fourth, it will also look at the effectiveness of the current public health measures to prevent and reduce the harm of tobacco use and vaping in Victoria as well as other potential reforms in that space which may be of benefit, because we all do know of course that ultimately, when it comes to issues such as tobacco consumption, it is at the end of the day a public health issue and you do not fix a legal problem that has a health base to it by ignoring the health aspect. The inquiry, of course, as will be its wont, will also look at various other matters that may come up as relevant to the inquiry.

I am very much looking forward to that, as I am sure you are too, Acting President McArthur, and it will be reporting back to this house we expect by no later than 30 November this year.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Youth justice system

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:47): This motion should be supported by all sides of the house. I move:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

(a) out-of-control youth crime is jeopardising the safety of Victorian homes and families;

- (b) youth crime rates are at their highest in 10 years;
- (c) there have been four ministers for youth justice since 2018 overseeing cost blowouts and worsening youth crime outcomes;
- (2) expresses concern at Labor's waste and mismanagement of the youth justice system, notably:
 - (a) spending more than double New South Wales on detention-based supervision for young people per day;
 - (b) overseeing more than 70 per cent of young people leaving detention or community-based supervision returning to sentenced supervision within 12 months;
- (3) further expresses concern that despite exorbitant funding, Victoria's youth justice system fails to set young people on the path to rehabilitation;
- (4) calls on the Allan Labor government to:
 - (a) conduct an immediate audit of expenditure on youth crime in Victoria; and
 - (b) overhaul the youth justice system to improve its capacity to rehabilitate young Victorians and keep our community safe.

Youth crime in Victoria is clearly out of control. It dominates the headlines, it dominates the radios and it also dominates community conversations, particularly in my electorate of Northern Metropolitan Region, and I think it is an indictment on this government. According to recent youth crime data there has been a concerning increasing trend of youth offenders, with alleged offender incidents amongst 10- to 14-year-olds up almost 32 per cent and an increase amongst 15- to 17-year-olds of almost 33 per cent. The rate of alleged offender incidents by 15-year-olds is the worst of any age group.

Instead of addressing the drivers of youth crime, Labor have failed over and over again and failed to act. Unless Labor takes real action to address the causes of crime, including early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation, Victorians will continue to suffer. However, victims, youth advocates and experts worry current outreach programs and diversion plans are not enough to curb youth offending. Former Victoria Police commissioner Kel Glare said there was an absence of effective programs diverting children away from crime and that no plan had been put forward by the government to effectively deal with youth offenders once the age of criminality increases.

Former commissioner for children and young people Bernie Geary said:

I think that if we talk about criminal responsibility, we should be focusing on parents and just coming to grips with how we can best support parents, who don't seem to be in a lot of cases able to direct their kids away from crime ...

As many of you in this place know, I have always tended to spout and advocate for a different approach when it comes to combating the root causes of crime. I mentioned it in my maiden speech in December 2022 and also wrote a chapter on it last year for a book called *Markets and Prosperity*, edited by Harry Stutchbury and published by Connor Court, which spoke about international examples from around the world of how they are dealing with their crime issues and focusing much more on rehabilitation, particularly of young people, who are at the start of their lives. It costs about \$150,000 to keep someone in prison, and we have a situation in Victoria where almost half of people that go into prison end up back there in two years. So wouldn't you, if you were the government, focus on and use resources on rehabilitation rather than having the taxpayer spend \$150,000 a year every year for the rest of their lives to keep a person in prison? Labor have their focus all wrong.

That is why achieving criminal justice reform is so important, but to achieve community support for any reform, community safety always has to be the number one priority. We all want our children to grow up to be productive members of our community – to contribute to our community rather than detract from it – and our youth justice system is inefficient, is costly and fails to set people up on a path to rehabilitation. A young person in detention-based supervision in Victoria costs \$5900 per day, more than double the cost of supporting a young person in detention in New South Wales, which is \$2759 per day. This investment is ineffective, and our youth justice system does not set people up on

a path to rehabilitation. In Victoria more than 70 per cent of young people return to sentenced supervision within 12 months, compared with just 48 per cent in New South Wales. Under Labor, vital crime prevention and justice programs to get young Victorians on the right path have been slashed, and the vast majority of young offenders who leave the youth justice system end up reoffending and are back there within 12 months.

We see in the news today, dropped into the *Herald Sun* on the front page, that police will get sweeping new powers to strip guns from criminals and stop the sale of machetes to youth gang members. This crackdown on crime will supposedly give police officers the power to stop criminals and stop the sale of machetes to anyone under 18. With Labor it is always a day too late and a dollar short. We called for a ban – for machetes to be classified as prohibited weapons. Labor seem to only want to move them to being controlled weapons, and they have only done it to age 18, whereas 24 would be a more appropriate age. I struggle to think of people – and there are exemptions – that would need a machete, particularly young people, for domestic purposes. You can talk about gardening and everything else, but anyone who knows anyone who is a gardener knows that most of it is done either by electronic means, diesel fuel or other machinery rather than machetes. So the Allan government has once again been exposed as flat-footed when it comes to youth crime. They are supposedly moving to introduce legislation today. The delay has seen machetes continue to be sold to youth and used in violent crimes, with police not having the powers to proactively remove the weapons from the street. The delay has allowed retailers to continue to sell this violent weapon to kids under 18 and gang members across the state.

We actually introduced a bill in the lower house to amend the Control of Weapons Act 1990 to ensure machete possession would be banned by making it a prohibited weapon. Once again Labor seem to be having a look at our ideas and making their own changes and putting through a sort of copy. I was watching the lower house debate at the time, and I went back and read *Hansard* because I could have sworn that a lot of members of the Labor Party were actually quite critical of our approach, quite critical of our helpful suggestion, which was backed by the Police Association Victoria and which was backed by a number of experts. So I went back and looked at *Hansard*. The member for South Barwon actually described our helpful suggestion and introduction of the bill on machetes as a juvenile political stunt. That is what he thought. I wonder whether he thinks today's news and today's bill are also juvenile political stunts. The member for Laverton also called it a political stunt, and the member for Greenvale called it fundamentally unserious. 'Fundamentally unserious' must be what he thinks of his Minister for Police. I very much doubt locals in Greenvale, Roxburgh Park, Attwood, Meadow Heights and Craigieburn would agree with Mr Walters's assessment of crime in the northern suburbs, particularly machete crime. They can have a go all they want at proposals, but then when they come back with a similar proposal and take up an idea, I think it is pretty fair that those members apologise. I think it is pretty fair for their communities to know what their members have been up to in the Parliament. They should apologise, because we were the ones that made this suggestion. The government laughed it off. Daniel Andrews thought it was irrelevant, but actually it was what was needed. It was what experts were calling for, it was what the police association were calling for, but as usual with this government, they are a day late and a dollar short on crime and the causes of crime, so they backflipped.

With youth crime at a 10-year high, now is not the time to weaken youth bail laws and raise the age of criminal responsibility. Declan Cutler was brutally murdered in March 2022. This case has been emotional and has affected many in the northern suburbs. I have been vocal on the need for criminal justice reform, but that does not extend to raise-the-age purists who believe a 14-year-old who committed such a heinous act should not be criminally responsible for their actions. I am not sure how the Minister for Corrections and Minister for Youth Justice and the Attorney-General could look Declan's mother in the eye and say it is the right thing for a 14-year-old to get off scot-free for intentionally killing another teenager. Yes, I have been vocal on criminal justice reform, but raising the age is not the way, and I am glad that 14-year-old, now 16-year-old, who committed that murder will spend at least a decade in prison.

This Labor government must take a leadership position and address youth crime and ensure we protect community safety. This Labor government is spending more than New South Wales on youth crime but is supporting fewer young people in the system. Victoria had the lowest rate of young people in community supervision of any jurisdiction at just 3.7 per 10,000 young people compared with 15.8 per 10,000 in Queensland and 9.1 per 10,000 people in New South Wales. Additionally, this Labor government continues to see Indigenous young people incarcerated at disproportionate rates – about one in seven Indigenous young people are in detention per day on average compared to about one in eight in 2021–22.

One of the most shocking figures is the extent of reoffending among Victorian criminals. Figures from the Children's Court show more than 40 per cent of kids aged 10 to 13 who have faced a Children's Court in Victoria racked up more than 10 police charges or incidents within two years of receiving their first police charge. Almost a third of kids in that age group who have been in police or court contact were also hit with six or more charges within two years of their first offence. At the time of their first appearance in the Children's Court 50 per cent had a prior intervention order in place. Shockingly, more than 96 per cent of those of those with a previous IVO were victims or survivors.

It shows that what the government is doing, the approach the government is taking, is not working. Children are offending and they keep reoffending, and we have seen incidents recently. We saw an incident just last night in the CBD, in my electorate, where 15 teenagers flooded a tram and were robbing people at 8 pm – in the daylight. Police caught up to them, or caught up to some of them, in Birrarung Marr and arrested three teenagers. We are seeing this over and over again. We are seeing violent home invasions, particularly in some of our south-eastern suburbs. My leader Ms Crozier even dealt with that personally. The extent to which Melbourne's crime crisis is reaching people is greater now than ever. Everyone seems to have a story. Whether it be on public transport, whether it be while going for a run or whether it be while going to the shops, people are coming across that crime. In the debate on Mr Limbrick's motion before people spoke a lot about that.

It is having an effect on my electorate, and the government is really not doing enough. There is almost one firebombing a week in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. I do not know how this government does not think it is a serious issue. In Glenroy not only was a shop firebombed, it was firebombed again 24 hours later. I visited Craigieburn South in the electorate of Greenvale, where a tobacco shop was blown up and also fire spread to the neighbouring house. It has happened in Fawkner about four times, and it just keeps happening – Coburg as well. The government has been caught quite flat-footed. Again, we are seeing the number of home invasions increase and the number of occasions of serious crimes increase. Particularly on the home invasions, it is worrying to see the age of some of the perpetrators that are being caught – it is very worrying.

That is why this motion is so important. We must get to the bottom of the government's youth crime mess. We need an audit of expenditure to understand exactly how money is currently being spent and how it can be improved, and we need to overhaul the youth justice system to ensure Victorians who may have found themselves on the wrong side of the law do have the chance to be rehabilitated and have the chance to contribute to our society. If we can achieve this, it is a win-win. This is a moral good for people. This is pursuing the value of redemption in people's lives. Instead of cutting funding to rehabilitation programs you can actually invest in young people in particular early in order to get that benefit, not only for someone's life but for the taxpayer as well. It creates an economic good. As I said, why would you choose, as this government does, to spend \$150,000 a year every year to keep someone in prison rather than make the investment necessary at the start to ensure that someone does not stay in prison?

I spoke in my maiden speech and on other policy documents about the stuff they are doing in Scandinavian countries in terms of justice reinvestment but also in the US, in states like Texas and Georgia. In Texas they have closed down 10 prisons in the past 10 years because they have invested in rehabilitation programs to keep people out of prison. It goes to show this government has the wrong approach in regard to youth crime.

We have a chance to have people – particularly young people – contribute to our society, and it is both a moral and economic good. The individual involved gets to live a meaningful and productive life, and society benefits through their contributions, reducing spending on the criminal justice system, and you can use that and reinvest it into community safety. But we must have community safety as our number one priority in all of this. You cannot weaken bail laws and raise the age of criminal responsibility – you fail to have the social licence to do that – if your number one focus is not on community safety. So I urge the house to support this important motion.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:06): I also rise to speak on the motion put forward by Ms Crozier and read in today by Mr Mulholland. What we have here once again from the Liberal Party is them taking a look at an issue, carefully picking out various odd statistics that help them to craft a narrative and using that narrative – using it for all their social media videos too, no doubt, and using it for their media lines. It is a very good sounding narrative; it is a very effective sounding narrative. The only problem is it is a narrative that does not add up.

We have got some statistics in this motion today, and Mr Mulholland has referred to a few of them as well. Firstly, I am going to start with New South Wales and the claim that we are spending double what they do on youth justice. I think an important point to note, firstly, that this motion completely fails to address is that Victoria actually has the lowest youth offending rate in the nation. This government does not resile from some of the various severe incidents we have seen recently, and we do not resile from taking action on that. But it is disingenuous to imply that we have worse offending issues than elsewhere in the nation when we actually have the lowest rate of offending in the nation. We also have the lowest incarceration rate per capita of youth offenders in the nation. I will just note briefly as well on that that the current proportion of offenders who are in the youth justice system – that is, the current proportion of all crimes that are committed by young people under the age of 18 – is currently around 12.7 per cent, markedly below the 20 per cent that it was at in 2014 when those opposite were last in power.

The other thing that it ignores is that it is easy to look at a blank figure and say, ‘That must be a problem.’ Each state has its own youth justice system. Naturally, you would imagine that in the smaller states – and this is borne out to be true in places like Tasmania and South Australia, where there is much lower population – of course it is going to cost more per inmate to keep them in there. The bulk-buy effect, if you like, is what Mr Mulholland seems to be spruiking by saying that we should be more like New South Wales. The more inmates you have, yes, the lower the cost per inmate will be. Victoria does have a higher cost per inmate than New South Wales, but as I said, we also have a lower incarceration rate than New South Wales does in our youth justice system. We have a lower youth crime rate than New South Wales does as well. So to pick these figures out and ignore the fact that we are actually leading New South Wales when it comes to this issue of youth crime is completely disingenuous and ignores the fact that the investments that this government is making are actually working. We do spend a considerable amount on this issue.

There is actually one thing I agree with Mr Mulholland on: where he talks about effective prevention in the first place. But that is exactly what we are doing. That is exactly why we are seeing the lowest youth crime rates in the nation. It does not happen by accident. It certainly did not happen under the previous government, when as I say, 20 per cent of all crimes were being committed by youth offenders. But now, when it is 12.7 per cent, that is a reflection of the very sorts of interventions and prevention methods that Mr Mulholland is calling for. They are already in place, and they are, by and large, working. Is there more to be done? Of course. There is always more to be done. And I acknowledge that Minister Erdogan is doing a lot in this space and has been working tirelessly, he and his office, particularly with some of these recent issues that we have seen as well but more fundamentally on the broader issue of reducing youth crime, and that is why we are seeing those numbers.

The figure of recidivism that Mr Mulholland mentioned – that 50 per cent are back in in two years time – I do not have to hand myself. I will take him at his word. But that is exactly why. He is saying

that these programs are not working, but they are working, because these diversionary programs are helping to break the cycle before people get into the youth justice system in the first place, which is of course the best time. There are always going to be cases where the right outcome is incarceration, and that will always apply, whether it is in youth justice or in the adult justice system as well. But especially for youth justice, the more of these offenders, especially at those lower ends, we can divert from a life of crime, breaking that cycle, the more it will have – and does have – a huge and profound impact on them, on their lives and on our society as a whole. And that is exactly why these programs are in place, and they are actually working.

To compare us with New South Wales and say they have got more inmates and they get more bang for their buck – the equivalent of the Aldi double buy or whatever it is that Mr Mulholland is putting forward today – is not a solution for Victoria's youth justice system. What this says implicitly is that you are happy to accept a higher incarceration rate, a higher youth crime rate, so that you can get more efficiency, more bang for your buck, in how much you are spending per inmate. That is not the approach of this government. This is a government that is determined to reduce youth crime but also to do it in a way, as far as is possible, that is compassionate and that breaks the cycle for those young offenders and gives them a chance, where it is deserved, to rebuild their lives. It is easy to look at a statistic and say, 'Well, that's an issue. That sounds really bad. I'm sure they'll get a run on the news tonight with that figure.' But do you know what? There is a deeper story, and the deeper story is showing that the interventions that this government is taking are actually working. As I say, there is always more to be done, but it is, broadly speaking and in a historical context, in a relatively good position.

I actually also note that general crime as a whole has increased since the pandemic. If you are able to be out of lockdown and out of curfew as we were in those moments, of course it is natural that crime will increase again.

Evan Mulholland interjected.

Michael GALEA: I am not blaming COVID, Mr Mulholland. I am pointing out that whilst that has happened since 2020, compared to 20 years ago, compared to the early noughties, which had the highest peaks of relative crime in this state if you look at it over a long-term basis, we are well below those crime rates of that era. So to say that this is out of control, as they are seeming to imply, is just wrong. It is in fact an example of how these diversionary programs are actually working and is why these figures are in the motion put forward by Ms Crozier and Mr Mulholland today.

So where would we be if we had not made that investment? We would probably be still at 20 per cent of all crime being committed by young people, maybe even higher, if we had kept going along with the Liberal Party's policies at the time, doing nothing on the issue and letting the system go to ruin, instead of what we have done under the Andrews and now Allan Labor government, which has been to invest in our youth justice system, putting the resources that we need into it, but also and most critically of all, putting those resources in to break the cycle. I am sure this is another point where Mr Mulholland and I would actually agree: the best way to reduce crime is not to do it after the fact, it is to prevent it in the first place. He is calling on us to take a look at that. What I say to him is that we are actually already doing it.

This motion, as I have said, for those reasons fundamentally I do have an issue with. It is all too easy to remember that it was actually this Liberal Leader of the Opposition that we have now who was the architect of their, I think, 2018 scare campaign about African gangs at the time – a hideously racist campaign that targeted vulnerable new arrivals in this country. I know some members of the Liberal Party are now doing their absolute best to court some of these communities, but I know they do not forget that it was only a few years ago that the Liberal Party were absolutely demonising them. The current leader of the federal opposition was going around saying people in Melbourne are scared to go to dinner because of African gangs – what an absolute disgrace. What a disgrace he was then and what a disgrace he is now. He is a hack in search of a culture war, as we saw in January with the absolute

rubbish of going after a supermarket chain for refusing to sell Australian-themed thongs. That issue aside, whatever your view is on Australia Day, I respect that there is a diversity of views, and it is good if we can have a sensible debate, not a ridiculously reactive culture war debate as we saw from their supposed leader, the Leader of the Opposition. But instead what we saw from this was threats against retail workers in Woolworths supermarkets increase and assaults against those workers increase as well, which is an absolute disgrace. I do not hold those on the state benches here accountable for it, but I am yet to hear any of them calling out that despicable behaviour from the federal Leader of the Opposition. As I say – you might agree with me, Mr McGowan – he is a hack in search of a culture war.

This motion, for the reasons that I have gone through, completely misses the point. They have completely missed the mark. They have cherry-picked at their leisure to say this is an issue, but they have completely got their sums wrong. They have completely failed to account for the fact that we have the lowest youth crime rate in the nation, we have the lowest incarceration rate of youth justice offenders in the nation, and that is a good thing. That shows that the interventions that we are putting into place are working, whereas you would lock them up and let that percentage increase and increase so we have more and more youth offenders. Our policies overall are delivering better outcomes for more youth justice offenders. There is always more to do, and we will continue to do it.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:16): I rise to speak on Ms Crozier's motion on youth justice and youth crime. This is an important area that needs real solutions. While Mr Galea seems to think that they have everything under control and that there is nothing to see here, the reality is that we are at a 10-year high when it comes to youth crime. Now is not the time to weaken youth bail laws, now is not the time to raise the age of criminal responsibility and now is not the time to make cuts to police stations. If we do not have strength in our youth justice system, not only do we jeopardise the safety of Victorians, but also we begin to fail vulnerable young people in our state. It is heartbreaking to see young people full of potential caught in the cycle of crime.

It is well documented that youth crime is on the rise. Here are some statistics for you. There is a concerning trend that is heading the wrong way. Alleged offender incidence with children between 10 and 14 years old is up almost 32 per cent; these are just kids. Alleged incidence with young people between 15 and 17 is up almost 33 per cent. And the rate of alleged incidence of children 15 years old is the worst out of any age bracket – 15-year-olds. The Allan Labor government continues to see Indigenous young people incarcerated at a disproportionate rate. About one in seven Indigenous young people are in detention per day on average. This is one more person than it was two years ago. This is a trend that is heartbreaking, and it is not progressive; we are heading the wrong way. Yet in the midst of a crisis, Labor have cut manned police station hours in 43 police stations across Victoria. It is counterintuitive, and it has potentially devastating consequences.

I was really shocked to hear yesterday the contempt displayed by Greens member Mr Puglielli towards the police in Victoria. Police are one of our most protective resources. They are worth respect and they are worth dignity, and I think they are doing a fantastic job. But police station cuts in my region have left many feeling vulnerable. The police station in Hastings has had its manned hours cut from 24 hours per day to just 16. The closest stations to Hastings now that are open are Frankston and Rosebud, and this is leaving young people and business owners and families feeling abandoned. At a meeting in Hastings with a business group that I attended recently there was a business owner that said she actually dreads the holiday period approaching because she knows when the holiday period approaches, there is a rise in youth crime. This has been a consistent pattern over the past few years. Police stations in Mornington have had their manned hours cut from 24 hours a day to 16 hours a day also, from Sunday to Wednesday. So it is giving those who are engaging in crime a clear time line of the best time for them to offend and the time when they are least likely to get caught. Last week you would have seen on the news that a 76-year-old man was assaulted by youths on the Mornington Pier. People should not be in danger when walking on a pier in a popular area, but this is what things have come to in Mornington. Lakes Entrance police station have had their manned hours cut to just 8 hours

a day. The closest stations are Bairnsdale, which is 36 kilometres away, and Sale, which is 106 kilometres away. This is just not adequate.

Unless Labor takes real action to address the causes of crime, including early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation, Victorians will continue to suffer. I believe we need to have strong penalties for offenders. A strong police presence is a powerful deterrent, and it is something that we should be increasing, not decreasing. There also needs to be hope for children and young people who have offended – hope for them to break the cycle and turn their lives around. Our youth justice system is ineffective, it is costly and it fails to see young people on the path to rehabilitation. In Victoria more than 70 per cent of young people return to sentence supervision within 12 months, compared to just 48 per cent in New South Wales. Under Labor, vital crime prevention and justice programs to get young Victorians on the right path are being slashed, and the majority of young offenders who leave the youth justice system end up reoffending and back in the system within 12 months.

So how can we give young offenders a way out? Well, education is key. Labor's broken education system is failing our youth; the school-to-prison pipeline is real, and we need strategies to engage at-risk students. A 2017 study by the Australian Institute of Criminology found a connection between poor school engagement and problem behaviour like drug and tobacco use. It found that once young people became alienated from school environments their attitudes changed towards poor behaviour. They found drugs, alcohol and smoking okay, slowly leading to violence and eventually jail. Our failure to adequately resource our education system is having consequences far beyond the classroom.

The second thing I would like to talk about is that community connection is key. I spoke recently to a young man in my electorate who had been involved in crime and managed to turn his life around. He said that community connection was a vital part of his rehabilitation. His suggestions were that community groups, churches, youth groups, Rotary and Lions clubs – everyone – can play a role in creating a more inclusive and connected environment that can help people break the cycle of crime involvement. So I support this motion, and I recommend the house support this motion.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (11:23): I am pleased to rise to speak on Ms Crozier's motion in relation to youth crime. I would normally begin by reading out some of the motion, but I feel that the language that has been used in the motion itself is probably unnecessarily and unhelpfully provocative in not taking a measured yet serious approach to the question of youth offending in the community. I do think that when we approach these debates – and I understand that people do feel strongly about them – we need to do so with language that does not seek to either escalate or victimise but seeks to address with seriousness the issues which many in our community face who are concerned about community safety and crime rates in their local community, and I will talk a little bit about some of the conversations that I have had with my local communities about these issues in recent months. But it also I think is incumbent upon us in having a measured debate on this topic to understand that the individuals that we are dealing with here are youth offenders. We need to make sure that we get them out of the cycle which they are so often in that is leading to these sorts of behaviours, and the approach that we need to take as a government and as a community and as leaders in both of those things is to understand and try to break that cycle of youth offending, because an approach to crime prevention is as necessary as a policing response to deal with incidents as they arise, and we can do both.

I am concerned about the way that the tone of the debate in this chamber has commenced. It is the starting point, as it should be, that everyone in the community has got a right to feel safe, particularly in their own home. Community safety must be an absolute priority of any government – of all governments, but particularly of a state government, which has community safety and policing as one of its core responsibilities as a level of government. Offending – breaking the law – is unacceptable and should not be tolerated, and we must support those who are victims of those acts, because the effects not only are immediate but can be long-lasting. We all know too well how sensitive – and rightly – people are to incursions and infringements on things like their home and the sense of safety and security that that provides to people.

We have seen, unfortunately, a series of incidents of youth offending across the community, and in the conversations that I have certainly had with local police in parts of my community in Southern Metropolitan Region and with neighbourhood watch groups – I have been engaged in discussing these issues with them – and certainly from the broader work that Victoria Police is doing more broadly in the community crime prevention space, we know at the moment what we are seeing is a very small number of young people who are committing a high rate of high-harm offending. That action is unacceptable, and we must hold them to account for that, which is why the frontline policing response that we have seen from Victoria Police I think demonstrates the seriousness with which the Victoria Police treats these issues. They do that with the government's full support, because in recent times Victoria Police have made significant dedicated resources available to tackle this sort of offending – resources that have been made available because of the decisions that the government has made over successive budgets to better resource Victoria Police.

It is an investment that we have been making over our time in government to invest in the sorts of resources that Victoria Police needs to tackle crime in the community so that with things like we have been seeing recently with increased incidents of youth offending in certain areas by certain groups of high-harm offenders, Victoria Police can initiate specific responses to try and tackle those. We have seen things like Operation Alliance, which has been established to disrupt and dismantle youth street gangs and prevent serious violent crimes. As a result of that targeted operation Victoria Police have made more than 1400 arrests and laid more than 3400 charges. Victoria Police have also recently concluded Operation Trinity, a dedicated operation to combat aggravated burglaries and associated car thefts. As part of Operation Trinity, Victoria Police made almost 1800 arrests, including 374 arrests for aggravated burglary and car theft.

What we are seeing is that because of the investments the government has made in Victoria Police's overall resources over a sustained period of time, when incidents like this do emerge in the community Victoria Police is able to respond with the resources that it needs. Far from the set of circumstances which those opposite might be seeking to whip up in the course of this debate, we are seeing that the Victoria Police response is effective in making arrests and in stopping offences. There is absolutely more to do, and we cannot stop with that vigilance. But it is very clear that Victoria Police are responding to these incidents, and they are absolutely making inroads.

But we do not solve these problems by just having an immediate and targeted policing response. We solve the problems of youth offending in the medium to long term by investing in crime prevention programs, by ensuring that, in the words of former pollies in the UK, we are both tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. That rings true today as it did back in the mid-1990s, which is why we invest in crime prevention programs to try and provide support services to young people who may be either engaged in or at risk of engaging in criminal pathways to ensure they have the sort of social supports that they need and the education that they need. This means that they have got the wraparound services, the family support and the social work support to get them out of pathways to crime. And those sorts of programs work. One of the investments we made under the youth crime prevention program is driving a 29 per cent reduction in offending for participants. That is nearly a third of people who are engaged in a crime prevention program not going on to reoffend, and I think that is absolutely the right sort of approach that we need to be taking and the right sort of investment that we need to be making as a government to ensure that crime prevention is as important a part of our response to youth offending as a policing response is. As I said, we are absolutely doing both.

We have seen repeatedly the effects of these intervention programs having an impact on things like youth recidivism rates. Our goal is to make sure that people do not end up long-term stayers in the youth justice system, because that is only a training ground for making them more efficient criminals. We need to make sure that their lives are put back on track and that they are supported but also that offenders are punished and that police resources are there to make arrests where they are needed and to respond to and support victims. But fundamentally we need to make sure that to reduce youth crime we are providing that range of services that are required, and that is the sort of approach that the

government is taking – targeted policing, crime prevention support and support to youth and families. That is the kind of approach that is going to see a real impact on these stats.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:33): I also rise to speak on this motion about youth crime and youth justice, and I would like to start by pointing out some things that Mr Batchelor said on the other side of the chamber. He said that there is ‘absolutely more to do’. Let us talk about how much more we have to do, and let us just look at number (4) on the motion. This is what we are here for in opposition – to call this government to account and to make it more accountable and more transparent. This is what it says:

- (4) calls on the Allan Labor government to:
 - (a) conduct an immediate audit of expenditure on youth crime in Victoria; and
 - (b) overhaul the youth justice system to improve its capacity to rehabilitate young Victorians and keep our community safe.

Let us just start at that point right now. Mr Batchelor talked about reduction and having young people not go on to offend, yet we know from recent articles from the *Age* that that is actually not the case. In fact that is one of the reasons that this motion is in place. The *Age* says:

More than 40 per cent of kids aged 10 to 13 who faced a children’s court in Victoria racked up more than 10 police charges or incidents within two years of receiving their first police charge ...

I fail to see how this is a good rehabilitation program that this government has. Let us go on to have a look at this one:

Among the children aged 10 to 12 years old who faced court, two thirds had their charges struck out or dismissed, including where they were found incapable of being held criminally responsible.

That is not such a bad thing if that is the case and we are looking after our young people, but what about the situation of prevention and intervention? What are we doing in that space? If this is adequate, then why do we have this:

At the time of their first appearance at the Children’s Court, 50 per cent had a prior intervention order in place.

Fifty per cent. I fail to see how this is a great rehabilitation program that is not worthy of the scrutiny that this motion actually proposes to this government.

On top of that, we can see that there are financial cost blowouts. Where is this money going if we are actually not having a huge impact on youth crime? We can see this motion says quite clearly:

- (a) out-of-control youth crime is jeopardising the safety of Victorian homes and families ...

Well, I am quite sure I can tell you that in my electorate my constituents are facing issues with crime regularly. In fact recently I was doorknocking in a court in Carrum’s Skye area, and in one little court the incidents of crime that had taken place were unimaginable. One lady goes to visit her friends with her baby, she takes her things out of the car, she has a brand new car in the driveway of a court and when she comes back to get the rest of the stuff for the baby the car has already been stolen. This was reported to have been young people, and I do not see that this government is doing enough.

Let us look at point (1)(b):

youth crime rates are at their highest in 10 years ...

That is in direct contrast to what people on the other side of the chamber have been saying – the highest in 10 years. So I do not see how all this money that is being spent is being spent in a way that is actually causing prevention to take place, or intervention. And I say this with tremendous passion because I myself have been a youth worker. I have visited youth detention facilities, I have worked and been in the courts and had to do court reports and I have had to go and visit young people in their homes, and I can tell you that there are major issues and we are not doing enough. More can be done, and that is what this motion is all about.

Point (2):

expresses concern at Labor's waste and mismanagement of the youth justice system, notably:

- (a) spending more than double New South Wales on detention-based supervision for young people per day ...

Double New South Wales. If this government is doing such a great job of managing the finances that it has in this area, why is it that it has spent more than double New South Wales on detention-based supervision? Let me say that one of those places of supervision lay dormant for 12 months. Goodness knows where that money was going. The motion goes on:

- (b) overseeing more than 70 per cent of young people leaving detention or community-based supervision returning to sentenced supervision within 12 months ...

I alluded to that earlier when I started speaking. Point (3):

further expresses concern that despite exorbitant funding, Victoria's youth justice system fails to set young people on the path to rehabilitation ...

I can say it is challenging work to work in the space of youth work, and I want to shout out to all of those who currently work in this space and say, 'Keep going. Continue to do a good job.' But we do have a lot of young people who are continually falling into the system and not finding their way out of it. We do need to be more vigilant, and we do need to look at what programs are on offer and how this money is being spent.

Again, like some of my colleagues, there are a number of things that I would like to point out. There has been a concerning increase, a trend, of youth offenders in the 10- to 14-year-old area, and that is currently up by 32 per cent. There has also been an increase in 15- to 17-year-olds, and that is up by 33 per cent. In fact the 15-year-old age group has been found to be the worst offenders in terms of incidents. This is definitely not being addressed appropriately or adequately by this government. Instead of addressing the drivers of youth crime, Labor has failed to act again and again and again and again.

I think it is incredibly important at this point for me to shout out as well to the police and to say that they do a phenomenal job and that we do need to teach young people to respect and to admire the work of the police, who constantly put themselves in harm's way. Some of them used to be part of – and I know that Brad Battin in the other place also was part of this – police in schools, and that program allowed young people and children to be around policemen not only to find out what they do but to understand and to have respect for the police force. That is, sadly, starting to lack, as we have seen in recent times, and I think this is something that we need to work very hard on. Having police in schools was of course a Liberal policy and continues to be a policy that we support, because we want our young people to understand the benefits of working with police and to understand that there are good police out there who are wanting to sort out things and that you can rely on in times of need or of crime.

Unless this government takes real action to address the causes of crime, including early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation, we in Victoria are going to continue to suffer. The youth justice system is clearly failing our young people and their parents. I can say that I have spoken to constituents in my area who are parents of young offenders, and it is heartbreaking for them that once they end up in the system there does not seem to be any way for them to turn around and get out of it. There is a very minimal amount of young people that actually do and can. Even though these young people can have the most loving, doting parents, there are inadequate support and programs available, and that is what this motion is actually addressing. I think we need to be very, very clear on that point.

To actually not want to support this motion to me is not only an oxymoron but actually inappropriate, because it is not doing the right thing by Victorians. We need to do the right thing by Victorians to keep them safe. We also need to do the right thing by our young people and to give them programs and opportunities to be able to get out of a life of crime and do something with their lives. I am very,

very pleased to be able to speak on this motion, and I do want to come up with one more thing and address the situation that was mentioned by my opponent on the other side of the chamber about the Sudanese. I love the Sudanese community. I love the African community. I have spent time in Africa, and I do think it is appalling that any group should ever be called out and singled out in the issue of crime. Even for those families, it is incredibly difficult. That is all I have to say.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (11:44): Today I rise to contribute to the debate on the motion from Ms Crozier. The motion notes a variety of contentions that are quite serious. It talks about youth crime jeopardising the safety of Victorian homes and families. It talks to the rate of youth crime. There is a line on ministerial accountability as well as the Allan Labor government's management of the youth justice system, and there is a line on detention-based supervision and its comparison to other states in Australia, particularly New South Wales. It might not say the word, but there is a line about what I think it is an important topic to talk about – recidivism rates. In my view this is important and something that all governments and the Allan Labor government should be committed to – and we are committed to: rehabilitating young people. Then it calls on the Allan Labor government to conduct an audit of expenditure on youth crime in Victoria and overhaul the youth justice system to improve its capacity to rehabilitate young Victorians and keep our community safe.

The Allan Labor government has without doubt made significant contributions to remedying the cause of youth crime and implementing prevention measures. We are approaching this from many facets. We have a Minister for Youth Justice, my friend Minister Erdogan in this place, who is taking the lead here, but also we have the Minister for Youth in the other place, my friend Minister Suleyman, and their initiatives to engage with, consult, listen to and learn from young people. We know that conditions that lower a young person's quality of life have been shown to directly impact their chances of being involved in youth crime, and therefore taking a whole-of-government and a whole-of-cabinet holistic approach is vital to tackling youth crime.

Across the state the Allan Labor government has been funding and opening youth hubs – spaces for young people to go and connect with other young people or participate in tailored programs that will improve their wellbeing and lives. The statistics show that if young people do not have support networks, safe places and community connections, they can in some instances turn to crime, which is exactly why the Allan Labor government believes it is essential that we invest in the quality of life of young Victorians. To do so we have created and supported youth hubs, centres like Scout halls and other third spaces for young people to come together and build community. I am thoroughly impressed with the work of the Minister for Youth and her dedication to improving the lives of young Victorians and of course the Minister for Crime Prevention and Minister for Police in the other place, my friend Mr Carbines.

There are also statistics showing a direct correlation between youth detention and recidivism. The younger a person is convicted, the more likely they are to be redetained throughout their lives. That is why we have invested more than \$13 million into funding youth crime prevention programs. It brings the total investment to more than \$40 million into the program, and it is giving an essential support service and social engagement to at-risk young people.

I have seen firsthand our investment into crime prevention programs at play. Last year I visited Swinburne University with the Minister for Crime Prevention to see the work they do in building connections with young people to build positive futures. It delivers a sense of community to ensure young people are set on a good path. I want to thank all involved in this, and I look forward to working with the team in my community of Southern Metro and the incredible university staff at Swinburne to deliver this.

Our crime prevention grants and programs in the Pasifika space continue to support young people. In 2021 the \$11 million building safer communities program delivered a series of community forums based on crime prevention as well as grants for local community safety initiatives. It was as a result of this that a partnership with the Centre for Multicultural Youth developed, where \$150,000 went to the

Pasifika prototype to find culturally appropriate solutions to keep young people on the right track. Our investment is working.

Our youth crime prevention program forms part of the broader \$100 million investment package, which has delivered more than 940 crime prevention projects, and evaluation of the program has shown the level of its success. The program has driven a 29 per cent reduction in offending in participants and a significant reduction in the level of severity of offending when it does occur.

Detention is an unacceptable outcome for Victoria's youth, which is why the Allan Labor government has opted to prevent the negative effects of youth detention through establishing and funding several prevention programs and strategies all over Victoria. In the 2023–24 state budget the Allan Labor government contributed \$13.6 million towards the youth crime prevention program, supporting young people between 10 and 24 who have been or are at risk of contact with the youth justice system. It is designed to broadly address the cause of youth crime activity. This has led us to \$40 million of investment in youth crime prevention since 2016. Child rights organisation 54 Reasons, based in the Greater Shepparton region, received \$350,000 for education and support services. We invested \$1 million to support the extension of the Pivot program, a local program running across Casey, Dandenong and Frankston which aims to tackle the cause of youth offending. They have been able to support over 4800 young people through their services, including 1800 who have received intensive support. And we launched the youth client voice project, a \$41,000 government investment as part of the Barwon Child, Youth and Family's Reignite Geelong program, which gave 12 young people who had had contact with the Victorian justice system an online platform to share their stories and inform our prevention services. Since 2016 we have invested more than \$26 million in youth crime prevention grants, including \$2.1 million to the aforementioned Barwon Child, Youth and Family.

The Allan Labor government is investing in prevention and is actively tackling the causes of youth offending, supporting organisations such as Pivot and 54 Reasons to engage youth in education, employment, interpersonal relationships and community connection. Our government's tireless efforts to tackle youth crime prevention are working. We are leading the country in responses to youth crime. We are making sure less people are behind bars, with Victoria having the lowest number of people behind bars on the east coast. There is still a lot of work to be done in addressing the causes and the aggravators of youth crime, but the Allan Labor government is doing the work – the hard work, the real work – to push forward the reforms to put young Victorians on a better pathway.

The *Report on Government Services* that my colleagues have discussed notes our successes in moving young Victorians away from the criminal justice system in the first place. We have the lowest rate of young people in custody. The young people in our youth justice system often have histories of abuse, neglect and trauma. We know the profound impact this has had on their lives, so it is vital that we support them in a multipronged approach from health, rehabilitation and education to intervention. It all helps to reduce the risk of reoffending. It is that early intervention that makes a big difference in the long run, so we have invested at record levels for the state of Victoria to give our young Victorians the best chance to address concerning behaviours and turn their lives around.

I have six kids, all of them in their 20s. I have been through the kinders, the primary schools and the high schools over an almost 30-year period of raising kids. I know that no young person is the same, so I appreciate the whole-of-government approach we are taking to this matter, from better education access from the Deputy Premier to the Minister for Health in the other place and indeed the Minister for Housing in this place. It is only the Allan Labor government that will continue to push forward the reforms that the Victorian youth need to avoid criminal activity. I am proud to work with a government that has started improving the outcomes of youth in contact with the criminal justice system and will continue to do so.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (11:52): I rise to speak to this motion 290 raised by Georgie Crozier. It is important in relation to this motion, it is fundamental in relation to community safety and it is an investment in our youth and our community's future. I speak because I have risen in this

chamber to speak in relation to increasing crime many times in this house. Youth crime is out of control and is jeopardising the safety of Victorian homes and families. Sadly, our youth crime rate is at its highest under this government.

To put it into perspective, I will give you a small picture of what we are facing. Just last month in January in my electorate there were several home invasions in Melbourne's west. These homes that were invaded were in Albanvale, Keilor Park, Altona Meadows, Sunshine, Braybrook, Kings Park, Deer Park and St Albans. Following an extensive investigation, over 140 offences were processed. Youth offenders were among those charged with offences, totalling over 45, including aggravated burglary and home invasion. I raised earlier this year the increasing crime in relation to those aged between 10 and 14 and that it increased 45 per cent across the state. In aggravated burglary, for those aged between 10 and 14 it spiked at 87 per cent. Ninety per cent of offenders involved in violence in aggravated burglary were between the ages of 13 and 19.

According to the annual report of the Commission for Children and Young People tabled in Parliament last year, violence in school is going up. At the end of 2021 there were 197 reportable allegations of violence in school. In 2022 there were 261, and in 2023 that figure jumped to 325. That shows that this did not happen overnight. Violent youth crime under this government has increased and has been steadily growing over the decade. What is really alarming is the increase in the trend of youth offenders, where the alleged offending among 10- to 14-year-olds has increased by 32 per cent and among 15- and 17-year-olds by 33 per cent. We need to ask why the rate of incidents for the age of 15 is the worst among the group. Instead of focusing on age, which is how the government is addressing the broken justice system, preventing youth from entering the system in the first place is what we need to look at. Raising the age may give this government a false fix for that age bracket, but it will not reduce the youth crime crisis in Victoria we are encountering. Under this Labor government it is vital we focus on crime prevention. Justice programs for young Victorians are the path we need to look at.

The fact is that under this government funds for effective programs diverting youth away from crime are being slashed and the vast majority of young offenders who leave the youth justice system end up reoffending and are back within 12 months. I will give you an example in relation to what we are saying about slashing funds. Having been a police officer, we had police in schools. We spoke to kids who were on that path and on the margin of getting in trouble, and they would interact with police. Police took those kids away on weekends, on camp, and would try to build rapport, give them advice and keep them on the right path. This government just took that away, slashed it away, just to cut the funding. That is an example of what I mean in relation to slashing prevention programs – proactive prevention. I just want to quote former chief commissioner Kel Glare, who said there were no effective programs diverting children from crime and there is no plan under this government. And that is actually true; it is what I am saying.

This government have taken no action to reduce crime for those who have offended and they have stopped early prevention, and we do not know what is going on in relation to how to manage the justice system. Do not get me wrong, our youth justice criminal system is not perfect, but it has a good structure to ensure the children who enter the system are protected. But under this government it is getting eroded, flooded and overwhelmed with youth offenders due to the lack of assistance to support those entering the system. Prevention and ensuring those that enter the system in the first place do not reoffend again is what we need to look at.

Mismanagement is an understatement when we are talking about youth offending under this government. They say they have spent \$13 million in relation to crime prevention. I am not sure where the money is going. Obviously is not working, according to the crime rate of youth offending at the moment. What we know is we need to focus on stopping youth reoffending. Under this government it costs Victorians \$5900 per day – more than double the cost of a young person in detention compared to New South Wales, which is \$2759 a day – to manage and supervise those youths. Why are we doubling the cost?

Members interjecting.

Trung LUU: I heard across the chamber that it is because of the volume. Surely you cannot compare managing, looking after and the supervision of youths to how you purchase goods. Surely the money is not to cover the cost of the power bill. I know Victorians are paying the highest power costs in the nation – another bit of mismanagement I will talk about another day in relation to the power bill. But in relation to managing kids in detention, it is something this government need to look at very closely – how they are giving kids the opportunity to not reoffend once they have been released.

I am not sure what this government is spending the money on, but it is certainly not investing in effective programs to set the youth on the right path, because in Victoria more than 70 per cent of young offenders are returning to sentenced supervision within 12 months, which is compared to 40 per cent in New South Wales. It is something we need to really address.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Yarra riverkeeper

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:00): (398) My question is for the Minister for Water. Over the parliamentary break I was disappointed to hear the news of the Yarra riverkeeper's resignation. Riverkeepers across Victoria take on the role of advocating for the many community groups that support the health of our rivers. In particular the Yarra riverkeeper has played an important role in enabling the community's engagement with the government's Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act 2017 through a regular engagement with the Yarra Collaboration Committee, which has no formal community representative. As you know, community engagement is a key feature of many aspects of the act. For example, section 10(2) states that:

Community consultation and participation should play an essential and effective role in the protection, improvement and promotion of Yarra River land.

What actions are you taking to ensure that the Yarra riverkeeper role can be restored?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:01): Thank you very much for that question, Dr Mansfield. At the outset I want to make it very, very clear that it is community that drives engagement with and within and for our waterways. We have been very, very clear about the importance of making sure that we invest in a range of programs and initiatives that develop and enhance a sense of commitment to making sure that our waterways are not only restored to a state of health, often after many generations of decline, but that they are also given a measure of investment and ongoing engagement to provide again that protection against what we know will be an inevitable impact of climate change and of volatility across inundation and through drier periods. This is a characteristic of the environments within which global circumstances for water and natural resource management are occurring.

The Yarra riverkeeper and the Yarra Riverkeeper Association are independent of government. But what they have done and what they continue to do is work alongside us, including as we develop and implement the Yarra River plan. You would know that the living entity status of this river has been a world-leading initiative. *Burndap Birrarung Burndap Umarkoo*, which is the Yarra strategic plan, has also been a key part of the work that we are doing to make sure that First Nations engagement and connection and self-determination are at the heart of making and keeping these really precious ecosystems as healthy and as activated as possible.

We have supported the Yarra riverkeeper with more than \$1 million of grant funding through the Port Phillip Bay Fund and the iconic urban waterways fund, and we would welcome the Yarra Riverkeeper Association's applications for further grant funding. Again, it is one organisation of so many across the state who do so much to make and keep our waterways as healthy as possible. We see all over the place when we are resurfacing creeks and when we are engaging with communities in growth areas

we are also making sure that we are assisting with their future protection and preservation. So we will continue to provide support through the Yarra strategic plan, and that is a multi-agency action plan that involves collaboration and partnership between Melbourne Water, councils of course, Parks Victoria and other water corporations. I hope that gives you a measure of understanding about the way in which its work fits into the landscape of broader partnerships in natural resource management.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:04): Thank you for that response. As I have outlined, an important function of the Yarra riverkeeper was to bring community concerns to the Yarra committee. This also went some way to providing the community with transparency regarding the implementation of the Yarra strategic plan. So without the Yarra riverkeeper and with no representation for the environmental community on the Yarra committee, will the minister consider setting up a formal mechanism for community representation on the Yarra committee?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:04): Thanks, Dr Mansfield, for that supplementary. I suspect I may well have addressed parts of that in the answer to the substantive question. Again, partnerships are informed by community input across a range of discussions, including through those partner organisations. Councils engage with community members. Landcare is driven by and for and with communities. Water corporations – including Melbourne Water, which is a part of this work on the strategic plan – have a very clear community interface. And this is where we will continue to provide those input measures, including through grant funding opportunities, and I would really encourage the Yarra Riverkeeper Association to make sure that they are in the mix for that.

Community input, as I said, is absolutely vital to understanding the needs of our waterways but also the opportunities that exist to keep doing what is working, whether that is about vegetation management, whether that is about making sure we can understand variations in seasonal flow or whether it is about activating citizen scientists in our community. So, again, communities are at the heart of this work, and I would encourage them to apply.

Bail laws

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:06): (399) My question is to the Attorney-General. Attorney, your government passed changes to bail laws last year that have not yet come into effect. One change, which the coalition opposed, would abolish the offence of committing an indictable offence whilst on bail. Going ahead with this change will weaken bail laws by making it easier for repeat offenders who are on bail to keep getting bail. Given the worrying increase in violent aggravated burglaries in Victoria, will the Attorney reverse this imminent change to bail laws before they become even weaker than they already are?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:06): I thank Ms Crozier for her question and acknowledge that we had a very lengthy debate in relation to the necessary bail reforms that the government committed to and on the whole received bipartisan support for the vast majority of that legislation. As you have pointed out, it does not actually come into effect until 25 March this year. We had what was universally accepted as the toughest bail conditions in the country, and we recognised that that was having a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable because it was capturing low-level offending – people that were not posing a risk to the community. It was particularly increasing remand in our women’s population – so important reforms to have.

We have never shied away from the purpose of bail: to ensure that the focus is on the unacceptable risk that a person poses to the community. For context, the offence of committing an indictable offence while on bail attracts a maximum penalty of three months. It was causing an impact of uplifting low-level offenders into a category which was making it difficult for those people to be provided bail. Removing that offence is not going to have a material impact on bail considerations. If somebody breaches bail, you can have it revoked. If somebody commits an indictable offence while on bail, you are still charged for that indictable offence. I do not think if you are about to go and commit a

carjacking, with a maximum of 10 years, that you are going to say, ‘Hang on, I’m not going to go and commit that offence, because it attracts an additional three months because I’m going to commit it while I’m on bail.’

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: It is just not a logical conclusion from what you have presented. There is no weakening of bail laws for serious offenders, and I would maintain that you claiming there will be is a false contention. I would encourage you to perhaps attend a bail hearing so you understand how the tests are applied.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:09): Attorney, I had an aggravated burglary attempt on me last week. I am just one of thousands. But I return to my question. Attorney, Crime Statistics Agency data shows a 33 per cent increase in residential burglaries in the 12 months to September 2023 and a 25 per cent increase in motor vehicle theft over the same period. We have serious crime going up at the same time police stations are closing at night, and the government is about to weaken bail laws.

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Yes, you are. Why won’t the Attorney listen to Victorians, who are telling the government that weakening the bail test for repeat serious offenders is putting ideology ahead of community safety?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:09): We are not weakening bail laws.

Ministers statements: flood recovery

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:10): I would like to use my ministers statement today as an opportunity to update the house on how the government is supporting communities impacted by storms and floods over the recent holiday period. In the Christmas period SES received 1300 requests for assistance, and 160 storm and flood warnings were published on VicEmergency. Between 7 and 11 January SES received an additional 1900 requests for assistance, 854 relating to flood. The state recorded its wettest nine days of January since records began. Heathcote received 150 millimetres of rain in 24 hours.

Yesterday I was pleased to announce a package of more than \$100 million for increased financial assistance to support immediate and long-term recovery efforts for those communities impacted, and many people appreciate in this chamber that those incidents were occurring to the same communities that were impacted by the 2022 floods, who are all in various stages of recovery.

The Minister for Roads and Road Safety in the other place will be on a construction blitz, with funding for emergency roadworks from rebuilding roads and bridges to fixing potholes and resurfacing roads. We have expanded the recovery support program and personal hardship relief payments available to eligible households, and we have activated disaster assistance for 28 local government areas.

For those that are in need of housing, mental health and financial support, I would encourage you to contact the flood recovery hotline. This is a place, a one-stop shop where you can be connected to services that are available, and that is 1800 560 760.

I want to thank all of the emergency services personnel, especially our emergency services volunteers, who once again answered the call for help, despite the fact that many of them were on holidays and wanting to spend time with their families. They gave that up to answer the call.

As we know, many of these communities are experiencing compounding events. One of the benefits of this is that those communities were well versed and knew what to do and responded appropriately. Emergency Recovery Victoria will continue to support communities and councils on what we know

can be a very long road to recovery. And of course I would like to acknowledge today is the 15-year anniversary of the Black Saturday bushfires.

Duck hunting

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:12): (400) My question is for the Minister for Outdoor Recreation in the other place. Last week the government chose to ignore the main recommendation from its own parliamentary inquiry and allowed recreational duck shooting to continue here in Victoria. One thing is clear: this government hates ducks. Acknowledging the inherent and severe issues with the recreational slaughter, they announced a suite of bound-to-fail, resource-intensive reform measures, yet these are not coming into place until 2025. Why did the government not at the very least call a moratorium on this year's season until these changes are implemented?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:13): I thank the member for her question, and of course as per the standing orders I will refer that matter to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:13): The government's shameful announcement was boosted by a \$10 million investment to improve the behaviour of duck shooters, who make up less than 1 per cent of the Victorian population. Meanwhile, the state's peak wildlife group, operating off a shoestring budget, is desperately fundraising to deploy their volunteer-led emergency vet triage tent in time for the 2024 onslaught. Funding for shooters is 2000 times the amount the government gives per year to Wildlife Victoria as they work around the clock to rescue and rehabilitate sick and injured native animals. Exactly how much in total will the reforms for the continuation of duck shooting cost taxpayers in a cost-of-living crisis?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:14): I thank the member for her supplementary question, which will be referred to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation for a response.

Cherry Creek Youth Justice Centre

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:14): (401) My question is to Minister Erdogan. Minister, in June last year you said:

The opening of the Cherry Creek Youth Justice Precinct marks a new era of modern, fit-for-purpose support for young people, better safety for staff and ultimately a safer community for all Victorians.

Workers within the facility, however, say the precinct is so dangerous due to gangs of young offenders terrorising staff that the facility is now known as 'Shiv Creek'. Given the latest Productivity Commission report showing 70.5 per cent of youths aged 10 to 16 returning to detention or supervision within 12 months of being released, when will the minister admit that these young offenders, staff and the Victorian community have been failed?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:15): I thank Mr Davis for his question and his interest in our youth justice system. We take the safety and security of our staff very seriously, and our investment in Cherry Creek was about a safer environment for our staff but also the young people in our custodial care. We continue to support our staff with enhanced training. We have a new certificate IV in operational safety and training that was implemented as part of the upgrade at Cherry Creek, understanding that Cherry Creek is transformational. It is a new model of intensive treatment, medical care, physical and social wellbeing. It is about making sure these young people have the opportunity to re-engage with education and an opportunity for vocational training and then employment. Yesterday Mr McCracken talked about Gordon TAFE. I know Gordon TAFE very well because they are one of our partner organisations at Cherry Creek that are working very hard to give these young people the opportunity to turn their lives around.

I have seen the claims that you are referring to, Mr Davis – unsubstantiated claims and rumours. I know you are not going to allow truth to get in the way of a good story, but you refer to the *Report on Government Services*, so let me tell you about the *Report on Government Services*. The *Report on Government Services* states that there was a material decrease in the number of assaults on staff in our system, which is a positive indicator. Assaults on staff have fallen by 20 per cent and serious assaults have decreased by more than 50 per cent. While even one incident is one too many in my view and the view of the government – we take workplace safety very seriously – it is good to see that there has been a decrease in the number of incidents in our custodial settings.

Nick McGowan: On a point of order, President, as the minister is referring to a speech or notes or a document, I would ask him to table the document so we can actually see the figures.

The PRESIDENT: Is the minister just referring to notes?

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: I actually might help out the whole chamber on this point of order. The minister is expected to give a factual response, and therefore referring to documents that assist him in that probably helps the whole chamber.

Enver ERDOGAN: Mr Davis was asking about the *Report on Government Services*, so I just wanted to share that statistic that there had been a 20 per cent decrease in serious assaults and a decrease of 50 per cent across the board. But indeed one incident is too many, and we take worker safety as paramount. That is why we have invested in a new facility which is designed to keep the young people and the staff as safe as possible. The smaller units are designed to address their behaviour. I notice that those opposite do not want the truth to get in the way of their story, but our system has gone through a transformation. Our Cherry Creek facility is changing the way we engage young people, but obviously it is up to those young people whether they take that opportunity.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:18): I notice that the minister did not engage with the title that has been given of ‘Shiv Creek’, and he did not engage with the recidivism figures from the Productivity Commission. I make the following point now and ask the following supplementary: Minister, dozens of incidents have occurred at the new fit-for-purpose centre that you said last year would provide better safety for staff and ultimately a safer community for all Victorians; with over 37 recent incidents, how many of the inmates have been moved to other prison facilities?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:19): I thank Mr Davis for his supplementary. I reject the premise of that question, because they are unsubstantiated claims and they are just factually untrue. But in relation to our Cherry Creek facility, we are engaging the young people. We have been up-front that it is a more complex cohort; that is what Cherry Creek is designed to do. I notice that you did refer to the *Report on Government Services*, and that is an important statistic to focus on, but our government has been successful in diverting a lot of people away from the criminal justice system. That is where we can get the best outcome – if young people avoid contact with the criminal justice system, then they will not show up in the statistics. We have the lowest number of young people in custody. In relation to the *Report on Government Services*, there is a significant lag. I know those opposite are not good with numbers, but let me tell you about the numbers. Those statistics are based on what happened in 2021. Our Cherry Creek facility was only opened late last year, if you follow the news, so the results for Cherry Creek – we will see the results. It is intensive treatment.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, I very specifically went to the 37 recent incidents and asked how many of the inmates have been moved to other prison facilities, and the minister has not answered in any way how many have been moved.

The PRESIDENT: Order! The minister was relevant to the question.

Ministers statements: housing

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:20): Last Wednesday I was in Flemington with passionate local member for Essendon Danny Pearson to celebrate 359 new homes being delivered at Victoria Street. The site has been transformed from a site of just under 200 homes to 359. That is 240 social homes and 119 affordable homes. That is a 21 per cent increase in housing at the site. This is part of our nation-leading ground lease model. It is a partnership with the community housing sector, a crucial sector in delivering social housing to Victoria, and it is bringing thousands of new homes on line to families and communities who need them most.

It was so wonderful to walk through the new development with Rose, who is a renter there who has moved in after being relocated to Deer Park. She and her children, who range in age from three to 18, now have a bright, modern, beautiful energy-efficient and well-connected home to call their own. This is a far cry from the outdated infrastructure at the towers which Rose used to call home and which can still be seen from the development. These new homes comply with design standards for accessibility, noise attenuation, flood, fire and seismic risk, and they are about making sure that while we move people from that outdated housing, which is no longer fit for purpose and which no longer meets needs as far as disability, accessibility and amenity are concerned, we are doing that in a way that means that now and into the future we are giving people just like Rose those homes that meet design standards and provide wonderful proximity to their communities and really a place to call home that they are truly proud of.

Lord's Prayer

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:23): (402) My question today is for the Leader of the Government. For over 100 years the Lord's Prayer has marked the commencement of the sitting of Parliament. It signifies the commitment we as members of Parliament have made to serve King and country. Due to recent media speculation, is the Allan Labor government considering removing this long-honoured tradition?

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: I think the minister has had similar questions as well, so I will call the Leader of the Government.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:23): I thank Mrs Tyrrell for her question, but what I would have to clarify in the first instance is that it is not a government matter, it is a Parliament matter, so any change to practices would be done with the agreement of the chamber. There is a view held by people from this chamber, which is exercised obviously by people that do not attend the very start of the day, that they have a desire to see it change. I have an unmet commitment to address this. It is something that I would like to have further conversations with parties within the chamber on. I have got to say I have had some other priorities that have taken my attention, but it is something that remains a matter that I would like, as leader and as a member of the chamber, to have conversations about. But to characterise it as an Allan Labor government commitment is not something that we would do, because particularly in this place we do everything by consensus.

Vocational education and training

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:24): (403) My question is to Minister Tierney. The Productivity Commission this week revealed that government real recurrent expenditure per student for VET in 2022 was the lowest in Victoria for two years in a row. In the middle of a cost-of-living and skills crisis, why has Labor reduced funding for Victorians to train and improve their skills?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:25): I thank the member for his question and for the opposition’s renewed interest and new interest in vocational education and training. In opening up, I would say given this renewed interest, I am wondering whether they are letting those that are thinking about vocational education and training, or indeed a university pathway, know what they actually did to the VET system when they were last in government, because they absolutely trashed it. They took \$1 billion out of the system. They sacked over 2000 teachers. They shut down 22 campuses.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, question time is an opportunity for ministers to answer questions, not to go on a frolic attacking the opposition.

Harriet Shing: Further to the point of order, President, as soon as Minister Tierney got to her feet the interjections began. You cannot even interject if you are not actually talking, but it did not stop you anyway. As soon as that door is opened, the minister is well within her rights to respond to those interjections.

The PRESIDENT: I am in a position where I uphold both of those points of order. Interjections are unruly, and also I will call the minister back to the question.

Gayle TIERNEY: Thank you, President. In terms of this government’s contribution to the vocational education and training system, it cannot be refuted, our contribution, whether it be in terms of capital works, the number of teachers and the whole range of aligning the delivery and acquisition of skills to jobs, making sure that we are in tune with what is happening with industry or making sure that we have got the infrastructure so that we can deal with the skills and labour issues confronting the economy. That is why we have established the Victorian Skills Authority. That is why we have established Apprenticeships Victoria. That is why we have established an apprenticeships taskforce. This is a government that is absolutely proactive when it comes to ensuring that we have a pipeline of skilled workers.

The other thing that of course happened, not long before Christmas last year, is that we signed up to the National Skills Agreement, securing significant funding for the skills sector in this state for the next five years. So to come in here and tell me we have not done enough in this space is an absolute joke on you and yours. And in terms of us being an efficient deliverer of vocational education and training, ROGS has absolutely enforced that.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:29): According to the Productivity Commission 47 per cent of certificate I and II, nearly 30 per cent of certificate III and IV and over 30 per cent of diploma students failed to improve their employment status after training, making Victoria the worst in the country for this measure. Why has the Labor government failed thousands of Victorian VET students with funding cuts, failed policies and failed promises?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:29): In terms of ROGS – for those not familiar with ROGS, ROGS is a report that has so many different indicators. The other thing that I should mention is that this is based on 2022 data, not current data, and of course there are a number of indicators in that report that hold Victoria at the highest level. In terms of certificates I and II, there have been issues across the board in respect to that. That is why we established Apprenticeships Victoria, that is why we have established a taskforce – so that we can be on the balls of our feet making sure that we have got a pipeline of skilled workers. But not only that, we are encouraging young people through our vocational major in our secondary schools to seriously think about hands-on occupations, and that is exactly what we are doing. We are making sure that we have got a skills and training system that we can all be proud of, and yet given all of that, those over there are now wanting – *(Time expired)*

Ministers statements: early childhood education

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:31): This week our littlest Victorians went back to kinder, and I rise to update the house on this government’s delivery of kinder kits for the new kinder year. I was recently able to celebrate the launch of the 2024 kinder kit at Sherbrooke Family and Children’s Centre with the fabulous member for Monbulk in the other place. It was a pleasure to see the students of Sherbrooke Family and Children’s Centre test the kinder kits ahead of their distribution across the state. Every child enrolled in a funded three-year-old kindergarten program will receive a kinder kit, and kinder kits celebrate an exciting and important stage in our children’s lives – starting kindergarten. These kits are designed to encourage families to get involved in their child’s education at home. They contain high-quality educational toys and books that promote learning through play. Importantly, two of the books selected for the kits are written by First Nations authors, and many of the activities and toys included are produced right here in Victoria.

Play-based learning is supported by many decades of research on how children best learn and how children best grow. Through play, children engage with the people, places and objects around them to build an understanding of their world and that beyond it. Play also helps children develop persistence, curiosity and imagination. Every item in the kit is designed for young children to engage in inclusive play. Most important of all, as well as being educational, everything in our kinder kits is fun. The kit also includes tips and ideas to help parents and carers guide their child’s early learning and development, and videos will be made available online to support kindergarten teachers and educators to talk to families about the many ways they can use their kinder kit to continue play-based learning at home.

All children deserve the best start in life, and that is why this government has invested \$14 billion in our Best Start, Best Life reforms, and our kinder kits are another way we are giving Victoria’s youngest learners the best start in life. I cannot wait to see what the children across our state will make of the kinder kits this year, and I take this opportunity to wish all our three- and four-year-old children a successful year at kinder.

Middle East conflict

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:33): (404) My question is to the Premier, represented in this place by the Attorney-General. Despite an order from the International Court of Justice that Israel take all measures within its power to prevent the killing of Palestinian civilians, the genocide in Gaza has continued unabated for 123 days. Over 27,000 Palestinians are dead. Two-thirds of them were non-combatants, mostly women and children. Many more are facing starvation as the Israeli blockade continues. Seventy per cent of homes and hundreds of medical facilities have been destroyed. We recently learned that last year the Victorian government signed an MOU with the Israeli Ministry of Defense. Many Victorians want to know what is in the MOU given the secrecy around it. So my question to the Premier is: will you heed the people of Victoria’s desire for transparency and release this MOU to the public?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:34): I thank Mr Ettershank for his question to the Premier, and I will pass it on to her and provide a response in accordance with the standing orders.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:34): I thank the Attorney-General for her assistance. This government has demonstrated moral leadership on many issues. We were the first state to introduce voluntary assisted dying and medicinal cannabis, and we lead the country with our reconciliation processes with First Nations peoples and our ambitious carbon reduction targets. So I ask: given the ongoing genocide in Palestine, will the Allan government demonstrate a similar level of moral leadership by withdrawing from the MOU with Israel’s defence ministry?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:34): I will pass it on to the Premier.

Cherry Creek Youth Justice Centre

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (12:35): (405) My question is to the Minister for Youth Justice, Minister Erdogan. The minister's foreword in the *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030* promised that the government would:

... enhance our ... health and safety systems so that staff feel safe at work ...

Given that 37 codes were recently called at Cherry Creek, when will the minister admit that this is just another Labor broken promise?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:35): I thank Mr Luu for his question and his interest in our youth justice system. I do note that this question is very similar to the question Mr Davis asked and I answered earlier. Nonetheless I will restate that our Cherry Creek facility is a state-of-the-art facility. It is a facility that is about smaller units, and it is about intensive care and treatment to give these young people genuinely the best chance to turn their lives around. I have talked about our partnerships with Gordon TAFE, and I thank Ms Tierney for again reminding those opposite of how much we value the TAFE sector in this government. The Cherry Creek facility is about giving these people the best chance to turn their lives around. It is about a safer environment for those in custody but also our dedicated staff. We will continue to support our staff with better training and better pay and conditions for many of them.

The most recent *Report on Government Services* shows that in the last year there has been a decrease in assaults on staff by more than 20 per cent and serious assaults have decreased by 50 per cent. As I stated in my substantive answer to the previous question by Mr Davis, there have been reductions across the board, but what I will say is that it shows that the investments that we are making are paying dividends. A safer environment for the staff is crucial to get the best results, and that is what Cherry Creek is based on. We closed down the ageing infrastructure at Malmsbury. When the opposition were last in government, they let it go into disrepair. We repaired it and made it safe, and now we have closed it and moved to a new facility, a state-of-the-art facility.

But I will not be lectured by those opposite about investments in youth justice. We have the lowest numbers of young people in custody. We have the lowest number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody. These are good outcomes, because we do not want young people to be in our custodial settings. We want them back in the community, back engaging with their education, because that will make us all safer in the longer term.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (12:37): Thank you, Minister, for your response. I notice you have thrown in some statistics, so how many staff at Cherry Creek Youth Justice Centre have lodged WorkCover claims in the past 12 months?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:37): I thank Mr Luu for his supplementary question. I think it is important to remember, Mr Luu, that Cherry Creek has not been open for 12 months. The announcement was made just over six months ago. It has gradually increased, the number of young people in there.

If you want to know about WorkSafe, we welcome WorkSafe into all our facilities, whether that be adult corrections or youth justice. We work closely with WorkSafe to make improvements across the board, because we take workplace safety very seriously. It is a paramount responsibility. We will continue to support our staff with better training and conditions, because that is what Labor governments do.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, I would just like to remind those opposite that they should be cognisant of standing order 8.02(5), which relates to asking a question that has been previously asked within six months. The question that Mr Luu asked was very similar to if not exactly the same as the previous question directed to the minister on Cherry Creek.

Georgie Crozier: On the point of order, President, this question was around the youth justice strategic plan that was promised. This is a completely different question from what Mr Davis asked. We go to the points around what is happening at Cherry Creek, no question about it. There is a similar theme here; there is a problem. And then we asked about WorkCover claims off the back of those incidents – so completely separate. President, I would ask you to rule out Ms Terpstra’s ridiculous point of order.

The PRESIDENT: I do not know if it is a ridiculous point of order. I was doing something I kind of regret just before question time – I was reading that new rulings book. There have been rulings that the same question cannot be asked within six months, but there have been rulings that if there are some variations then it can be accepted. I accept that Mr Luu did have some variation to Mr Davis, so I will bow to those rulings of previous presidents. But I do take note that I think there have been occasions where exactly the same question has been asked within six months in previous parliaments, and that is the ruling that has been set.

Ministers statements: youth mental health services

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:40): I rise to update the house on the opening of three new children’s health and wellbeing locals ensuring that Victorian children and their families get the mental health support they need when they need it. Late last year I joined federal Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention the Honourable Emma McBride in Sunshine to officially open three new services located in Sunshine, Bendigo and Cranbourne thanks to an investment of over \$41 million from the Victorian Labor government and \$22.3 million from the Commonwealth. These services, delivered by the Allan and Albanese Labor governments, are part of our bilateral agreement on mental health and suicide prevention and provide specialist support for children aged zero to 11 years and their families free of charge, with no referral required. Support includes specialist medical and allied health services for children who are experiencing developmental, behavioural and emotional challenges, including paediatricians, psychologists and speech pathologists, all under one roof. Backing our young Victorians is critical, but so is supporting their parents. That is why the locals will also deliver family services, group parenting programs and culturally safe wraparound services.

These services have been designed in consultation with the local community and people with lived experience as well as local service providers, including our Aboriginal community controlled organisations. Delivering on key recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System and the *National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*, these locals respond to the need for a renewed focus on early intervention and age-appropriate care to meet developmental and mental health challenges in younger Victorian children. We have made record investments in our mental health system, ensuring Victorians get the care they need and deserve, and this partnership with the Commonwealth is another example of how the Allan Labor government is working to completely rebuild – *(Time expired)*

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:42): That ends question time and ministers statements. Can I thank Minister Symes, who will get written responses in line with the standing orders from the Premier for Mr Ettershank’s questions, and similarly Ms Tierney for the questions from Ms Purcell to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation.

Questions on notice

Answers

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:42): President, I have 16 unanswered questions on notice that I would like to seek an explanation for. I have raised the fact that these answers are overdue with the relevant ministers' offices, as per standing orders.

I ask the Minister for Mental Health, representing the Minister for Health, for an explanation in relation to question on notice 1264, which is an important question regarding the progress or fate of a very well funded and much-needed long-term study established in 2017 into the health outcomes of children and adolescents with gender dysphoria attending the Royal Children's Hospital.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:43): President, I will follow that up.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:43): I also ask the Attorney-General, representing the Minister for Environment, for an explanation in relation to questions on notice 763, 765, 767, 769, 778 and 1263, which broadly relate to clean waste and toxic spoil stockpile and storage locations in the Western Metro Region, including their categorisation; any testing for contamination of those sites; the number of confirmed and reported environmental impacts, including run-off, odours, dust et cetera; the actual residency time of waste and spoil at these locations; and any EPA documents relating to the storage of toxic spoil in this state. These are vitally important questions not just because my residents in the west are suffering from bearing an unfair burden in the region, but also, as we have just heard, in light of the news that the Suburban Rail Loop will also create an enormous amount of toxic spoil.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:44): Mrs Deeming, thank you for raising that. I will follow it up.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:44): I have got more. I ask the Attorney-General, representing the Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, for an explanation in relation to question on notice 1169, and representing the Premier, in relation to questions on notice 1164 to 1166. Broadly, they relate to accountability and transparency regarding the specific transfers of power, land and money under Victorian treaty negotiations and the management of the now cancelled Commonwealth Games.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:45): Mrs Deeming, I will follow that up, and I might just add additional context to reassure members. The legislation committee, which is a cabinet committee, regularly goes through lists of our overdue questions on notice and chases them up as a matter of practice. But also you raising it in the house is an appropriate mechanism and will reinforce those conversations that we are having with offices that have overdue QONs, acknowledging that I have some myself.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:45): I have got some more. I ask the Minister for Housing, representing the Minister for Planning, for an explanation in relation to questions on notice 1209, 1215 and also 1210, which is the same question as 1209; we sent them to two ministers. These questions relate to proper processes in relation to the level crossing removal scheme at 11 Tame Street, Diggers Rest, and the Stan Payne Reserve that are time sensitive for the residents involved.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:46): Thank you, Mrs Deeming. I am really happy to follow that one up and to get you a response as a matter of priority.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:46): And I ask the Minister for Children, representing the Minister for Education, for an explanation in relation to questions on notice 771 and 1207. These questions broadly relate to the government's awareness of education policies relating to

the increasing reports in schools of children identifying as animals, or furrries, and for the recording of mature minor status in schools. They are important for child welfare, parental rights, educational environments and student rights in general.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:46): Thank you, Mrs Deeming. I will follow that up with the minister.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): I have a list of 57 outstanding questions on notice. I have spoken to the Leader of the Government about these. Nineteen of these indeed were initially put on the notice paper on 20 December 2022, so they are actually very, very long in the tooth. A number have been reinstated by you, President. I note of that group that go back to 2022 there are 10 that relate to the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure, who I think is now the Premier, which brings me to my other point: I think there may be some confusion in government about changes in the ministry, and a number of these questions may have thereby fallen between the cracks. With the minister's approval I might give her this list, which tabulates all the ones in question.

The PRESIDENT: I am sure that she will think that is helpful. Minister, did you want to respond to Mr Davis's request?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:47): Mr Davis has indicated that he will provide me with the list, and as for my commitment to Mrs Deeming, we will follow that up.

The PRESIDENT (12:48): I have received a written request from Mr Davis seeking the reinstatement of questions on notice directed to the Minister for Energy and Resources. Having reviewed the responses, I order that questions on notice 813 through to 895 be reinstated in full as the responses do not address the range of information sought by Mr Davis.

Constituency questions

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:48): (637) My question is for a minister in the other place, the Honourable Lily D'Ambrosio, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Climate Action and Minister for the State Electricity Commission. Andrea and Craig are looking to build their dream home in Greenvale. They are a family of four with two pups, and they want to build a house and are looking forward to their new all-electric heating and appliances. Can the minister please outline how much Andrea and Craig can expect to save when switching to an all-electric home in the Northern Metropolitan Region?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:49): (638) My question is to the Treasurer. Based in Latrobe Valley, Trevor Hodge is the director of Hodge Forestry Services and, due to Labor's shutdown of the timber industry, has lost his sole source of income – field and systems third-party OH&S audit contracts. Having been in the industry for 20 years and being a valuable contributor to this industry, he does not qualify for any of the government's so-called compensation scheme payouts. Trevor wrote to me stating:

As you know the Government's decision to end native timber harvesting from the state's forests six years ahead of schedule has inflicted untold damage on the people involved in this industry, their families and their communities.

...

Contracting businesses like ours are suffering particularly severely.

There are a number of VicForests contractors who will not be able to continue on. Will the Treasurer extend forestry compensation packages to service-based industries like Hodge Forestry Services?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:50): (639) My question is for the Minister for Local Government. It was almost a year ago that I previously raised the matter of Casey City Council meeting times, and I thank Minister Horne for following up in writing to the chair of the administrators at the City of Casey to highlight the concerns of residents unable to access meetings. In an article published in the *Cranbourne Star News* last year, staff at the council stated that the meeting times could not change until 2024, but earlier this year the administrators resolved to keep the meeting time at 4 pm. This was despite a paper petition with nearly 250 signatures being presented to council by local resident Stephen Matulec and no other metropolitan council having meeting hours during business hours. So once again I am asking the Minister for Local Government what can be done to ensure that Casey residents have adequate access to local government meetings.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:51): (640) My question is for the Treasurer. Many residents across southern metropolitan Melbourne are looking to buy their first home, so can the Treasurer please outline how the Victorian Homebuyer Fund shared equity scheme will benefit first home buyers in the Southern Metropolitan Region? We know many Victorians want to buy a home – their first home – and Labor shares their ambitions. We know that sadly home ownership is becoming more and more out of reach for many first home buyers. House prices are rising; interest rates are a constant source of stress. The Victorian Homebuyer Fund will mean that if you are struggling to buy a home, you can apply to have the Victorian government make a financial contribution to the purchase of your home in exchange for an equity share in the property which can be paid back over time. Under the Victorian Labor government first home buyers will not be left out in the cold.

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (12:51): (641) My constituency question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. The question that I ask of the minister is: can they reveal when the Colac-Ballarat Road, in particular the section near Enfield south of Ballarat in my electorate, will be fixed? If you have driven along this road, it is a complete shocker. I know that those opposite love to say they love country Victoria; they clearly do not if they have been on these roads. You see potholes literally the size of one lane of the road, and if you look at a particular section right near Enfield as you enter, you literally have to switch to the other side of the road in order to safely traverse. It is absolutely shameful – and this goes on for nearly 200 metres, mind you; it is not just one limited section. So my question to the minister is: please actually make the effort to fix this, and I want to know when it actually is on the works program to get done. The surface is crumbling away. Locals are really annoyed, and we need action now.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:53): (642) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. My constituent is a resident of Dandenong. Like me and many others in our community, my constituent was heartbroken to hear about the toddler that was fatally struck by a car on Stud Road in Dandenong North late last year. As the minister knows, Stud Road is a notoriously busy transport route and has limited places to safely cross. Six people have now lost their lives on that stretch of road in the last 10 years. There is a costed and shovel-ready council project that would build a safe pedestrian crossing on Stud Road near the Dandenong Stadium. So my constituent asks: will the minister provide our community with certainty and fund this project as a matter of urgency in the 2024–25 budget handed down in May?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:53): (643) My question is to the Premier, who is the former Minister for Commonwealth Games Delivery. On 18 July 2023 the Labor state government

announced it had cancelled plans to host the Commonwealth Games. I met with sports groups, businesses and school students who were all disappointed by the government's decision. It has been six months since the games were cancelled, and regional towns like Bendigo are still waiting for news of local projects. How much of the \$2.6 billion allocated to deliver the Commonwealth Games has been spent on legacy projects in regional areas, and when will works on promised projects like the Bendigo showgrounds be completed?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (12:54): (644) My question is to the Minister for Planning. One of my constituents, Dr Clare Karunanithy, a long-time resident of Coburg, reached out to me as she has been observing the gradual dilapidation of the former Kangan Batman TAFE campus located at 31 The Avenue, Coburg. The campus is located on publicly owned land and has been disused for more than 10 years. We know that the property was leased to the Level Crossing Removal Project for redevelopment by the state government, but it has continued to sit unused since the Coburg section of that project was completed in 2021. An assessment of redevelopment options was planned for the site. However, it is unclear whether this assessment was undertaken. Minister, what is the government planning to do with this abandoned site, and will the community be consulted before any redevelopment decisions are made?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:55): (645) The Eastern Victoria Region is home to Victoria's best beachside tourist hotspots – Mornington Peninsula, Bass Coast and Mallacoota to name a few. At a community forum in Hastings, residents informed me that communities along the Mornington Peninsula desperately need a stronger police presence to ensure a safer holiday season for tourists and the local community. They said they are beginning to dread the season because over the past few years with it they have seen a spike in crime. Over the period a 76-year-old man was assaulted by teens on the Mornington Pier. A rise in unsafe jet ski hooning behaviour has led police to have to wear body cameras. My question is for the Minister for Crime Prevention: what measures are you taking to address the spike in youth crime along the Mornington Peninsula?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:56): (646) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it concerns the continued neglect of safety of pedestrians at the Kialla West Primary School crossing. I first raised this issue in 2018, and it is disappointing that there has been no action from the government. Five years ago a horrific three-vehicle accident occurred at the crossing. Jane Sharp and her two eldest daughters were treated at Goulburn Valley Health, but unfortunately Jane's youngest daughter Addison had to be airlifted to the Royal Children's Hospital. To this day Addison, who graduated from the school last year, still faces challenges because of this incident. Given that every response I have received in the past five years regarding this issue has claimed that Regional Roads Victoria is working with the school and local council to explore solutions for the crossing and the school council is yet unaware of any progress, my question for the minister is: will you organise a meeting between Regional Roads Victoria and me in order for them to provide me with an update on their progress?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:57): (647) My question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it is also regarding a missed opportunity that I might add was originally funded and for which provisions would have been made by a Liberal government, with \$36.5 million being co-funded – \$30 million from the feds and \$6.5 million from the state – but has been ignored by this Labor government. My question to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety is this: will the minister revisit the planned upgrade works along Ballarto Road in Skye to include the CFA-requested controlled intersection at Potts Road and Ballarto Road in Skye so that there is a safer

mode of exit and less lengthy delays? The CFA are in danger. They have really been asking for this for a very long time. They see that this is an opportunity for them to be able to enter safely so that they can respond to code 1s, and they have experienced delays at this intersection. Under the existing traffic management system emergency vehicles are not able to – (*Time expired*)

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:59): (648) My question for the Minister for Disability concerns the Geelong Food Relief Centre. I visited the centre last month and saw the incredible work done by CEO Andrew Schauble and his expert, dedicated, caring team. With four full-time staff, they marshal a team of up to 180 volunteers and deliver a huge service across the region via mini-mart sites but also relationships with smaller charitable organisations. They organise bulk ingredient delivery and cook or arrange bulk meal production themselves as well as direct distribution to those in need. Nothing is wasted. It is extraordinary and incredible value for money. Stepping inside, it is obvious how effective and enthusiastic the team is. Their personal relationships allow tailored care and advice for individuals and cooperation with other voluntary organisations. Minister, the value return for the small funding they receive is absolutely astonishing. To assist them, will you provide multiyear budget settlements, not single-year grants which make planning and management difficult?

Sitting suspended 1:00 pm until 2:03 pm.

Motions

Youth crime

Debate resumed.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (14:03): I will continue my contribution. As I said earlier, unfortunately the facts are that under this Labor government the vast majority of youth offenders who leave the youth justice system end up reoffending and back within 12 months. Our youth crimes are at a 10-year high, and now is not the time to weaken youth bail laws. How many times under this government have you heard that an offender has committed a horrific crime just as they were released on bail?

In relation to this, it is about community safety and supporting our youth. They are the future of our society. So in support of this motion, I commend it to the house. It has my full support.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:04): I rise to speak to this motion. There are two focuses in this motion: first is the concern about the rates of youth crime in Victoria, and second, the level of government expenditure on the youth justice system.

The first concern alleges that youth crime rates are at their highest in 10 years. Indeed there have been some recent tragic incidents involving youth crime, including in my own region of South-Eastern Metro. But when we look at data collected on crime, we get a clearer picture of the long-term trends. On the whole, there is less crime than there was a decade ago, including for those from 10 to 24 years of age. Victoria Police also stated that overall youth offending remains below COVID levels. This rhetoric of an out-of-control crime wave is harmful. We should not be treating youth crime this way. Doing so just stokes community fears and fuels further violent behaviour.

The second concern in this motion relates to expenditure. It notes that compared to other jurisdictions Victoria spends much more on detention-based supervision and that rehabilitation measures are more often than not unsuccessful. Proper rehabilitation services increase the average cost of a young person per day in detention. Isn't it a given that you would have to spend more money on rehabilitation rather than the young person ending up back in detention? Relative to population, Victoria's total expenditure on youth justice is less than the national average. Victoria has the lowest rate of young people in youth justice detention, being 1.1 per 10,000 compared with the national average of 2.7 per 10,000.

Unfortunately, rehabilitation is not foolproof, and often those that enter the justice system do end up returning. But what this is testament to is the need for justice reinvestment and preventive measures. We should be focused on getting young people on pathways away from the criminal justice system before they even enter it. In Victoria we have had calls from major figures, including the Victorian Ombudsman Deborah Glass and Victoria's former deputy chief magistrate Jelena Popovic, to investigate justice reinvestment, particularly for the role it can play in reducing youth offending.

A part of these measures needs to focus on community connection. Often young people join gangs or similar groups to find connection when they do not receive it in their family home or their immediate social circles. Measures that focus on indirect lifestyle and social factors often have a significant preventative benefit when it comes to young people entering the criminal justice system. Community initiatives like child healthcare services, early childhood education and programs for at-risk young people all make a difference in addressing the underlying causes of crime. Initiatives like Empowering Communities, which invests in the Casey community in my region, help to address the local issues impacting youth crime and perceptions of safety. These localised initiatives get the community onboard and are more likely to be effective than top-down measures.

We commend the government on its work to keep people out of the criminal justice system. Focus on justice reinvestment, providing funding for community organisations and social support mechanisms are all tools this government needs to use better to support our young people. This motion stokes fear. It does not seek to make our community safer through support services and justice reinvestment. Accordingly, we will not be supporting this motion.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:08): I rise to make a contribution on this motion standing in Ms Crozier's name on youth justice. I have had the opportunity to listen to the contributions made by others in the chamber today but also have read the content of the motion, and I think the motion is poorly considered and poorly formed and conflates a number of things in regard to crime, the age of criminal responsibility and a number of other things.

I note my colleagues have spoken at length to address some of the points in the motion, but I might just go to some of the statistics, which I think those opposite really were basing a lot of their information on in trying to suggest that there is some kind of out-of-control youth crime wave. Effectively, Victoria has the lowest rate of young people in youth justice detention at a rate of 1.1 per 10,000 versus the national average of 2.7 people per 10,000. So Victoria, as I said, does have a lower rate of younger people who are incarcerated, but we also have the lowest rate of young people in youth justice community supervision, at a rate of 1.1 per 10,000 versus the national average again of 2.7 persons per 10,000.

We also have the second-lowest rate of Aboriginal young people in detention behind the ACT. These are important statistics, and I know these are statistics that those opposite would not necessarily want to hear or acknowledge because I note there has been no real consideration of the actual facts in regard to this. I heard Minister Erdogan talk in his ministers statement earlier in question time today and try to explain some of the detail. The detail and the facts are lost on those opposite because, again, what they want to do is just a crime-scare kind of motion in regard to this. But the facts do not lie, and clearly what I have outlined to the chamber is that Victoria has the lowest rate of young people in youth justice: 1.1 persons per 10,000 compared to the national average of 2.7 persons per 10,000. Those stats do not lie.

So in terms of costs – and again this is from the *Report on Government Services*, so this is tabled, and it is an important report that details and compares government spending and information on the cost of detention and people in detention – the Liberals' motion, when we are talking about cost comparison and the costs of detention, focuses on the detention cost per young person per day. These statistics are misleading, because the success in reducing young people in custody inherently increases the average cost per person. The comparison also ignores the impact of fixed costs and investments in keeping people out of custody, and we all know that really the best bang for buck that comes when you are

dealing with youth crime is in actually assisting people to stay out of the youth justice system through appropriate diversion programs but also through important programs like –

A member interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Those opposite want to bag us about our huge reforms and massive investments in early childhood education, but one of the key areas in helping young people stay out of the youth justice system or the justice system is early childhood education. It is a significant and important social policy that helps young children who may be from larger families or poor socio-economic backgrounds. The earlier children can get into quality childhood education, their trajectory is better, if they are in an at-risk cohort. Those facts do not lie – it is well documented.

Just getting back to the *Report on Government Services*, that report goes down into some granular detail. It explores the total expenditure, not just in detention, compared against the population size – so that is per young person in the population of that particular jurisdiction. This shows that relative to population, Victoria's total expenditure on youth justice is actually less than the national average. The national average total expenditure on youth justice per person – and that looks at youth offenders in the 10- to 17-year age bracket – for 2022–23 in Australia was \$508.25 per person, and Victoria was at \$482.78 per person. So clearly we are spending less than the national average.

The most important aspect about helping young offenders is actually keeping them out of the justice system – to have diversion programs in place or through our early childhood education and care systems to make sure that we can pick up any children who may be on a trajectory that way or to particularly help with their families that may be struggling, and to provide those early interventions so that those children do not end up on a trajectory that begins in juvenile offending and ends up later on in more serious offending. As I said, this motion is a disappointing motion because trying to scare the community into thinking that we are in the midst of a youth crime epidemic, it is never –

Georgie Crozier: Tell that to the family of Dr Gordon.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Ms Crozier, I will take up your interjection, because I just think it is really a low-rent opportunity for you to use the death of someone in this context to try and attack the government. I do not know whether the family would actually appreciate you bringing that up, and I do not know if you have actually spoken to them about it.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: No-one is denying the fact that when –

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! This is not a discussion across the chamber. If the member could return to her contribution and desist from conversation across the table. I ask Ms Crozier to also desist from conversation.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Thank you, Deputy President, but I did say I would take up that interjection, and I am entitled to do that in my contribution, which I did do. That is my right as a speaker in this chamber.

I will just make the point that when we are discussing crime, we need to be mindful that there are victims of crime and their families that are impacted by that. As politicians, when we stand here and talk in this chamber about someone who has lost their life, we need to be mindful that there are people attached to this crime, rather than using it for poor political pointscore, which always reflects poorly on those people who do it.

I make a contribution in opposition to this motion. It is a poorly thought-out, ill-informed motion designed to score petty political points. It really is poorly wanting in terms of the facts and truth of the information, so we will be opposing this motion.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:16): This is an important motion and one that I think needs to be taken quite seriously. I know my colleague Dr Heath made some great points in regard to police station closures, and other members for Northern Metropolitan might be interested in this point: in 2021 the then Andrews government actually invested \$15 million in a new Reservoir police station – quite good. It was to be open 24/7. Lisa Neville showed up and did a great ceremony about what Labor was delivering, only for them to at the end of last year reduce the hours to just 8 hours a day – just 8 hours a day. In a part of the world, in my electorate, where crime is on the increase this is how they treat community and also treat taxpayer funds. If you expand a facility to make sure it is open 24/7, surely you have got the resources to be able to keep it open. I was pretty shocked when that was savagely closed.

But I just want to go to some of the points Ms Terpstra was raising. She said what we are putting forward is a big scare. It is actually quite a sensible motion. It does talk about justice reinvestment, and it does talk about making sure there are proper rehabilitation programs that are not being cut by Tim Pallas. Offender incidents amongst 10- to 14-year-olds are up 32 per cent. That is a fact. And it is 33 per cent amongst 15- to 17-year-olds. But here you have got the government, in the same cohort in which those figures are increasing by record levels, wanting to raise the age of criminal responsibility.

I mentioned the Declan Cutler issue, a teenager who was brutally murdered by another group of teenagers in my electorate, which affected many people in the northern suburbs. How can anyone on the government side look Declan's mother in the eye and say that 14-year-old should not have got 10 years jail for killing her son? I know I could not. I do not understand how they are even contemplating raising the age of criminal responsibility, but this is what we have when a government is out of touch with community sentiment. Lots of people have been affected by crime. I have never seen so many people that have firsthand and second-hand accounts of incidents and are affected by crime. We saw it just in the CBD last night, where 15 youths got on a tram and started robbing people and shoving people up against the wall. Thankfully, police arrested three of them, but these are the kinds of issues Victorians have to deal with every single day.

I also heard Ms Terpstra – and I think it is quite preposterous – actually make the link and try to say the way that we can keep people out of prison is with free kinder. Seriously? You have got Tim Pallas cutting crucial rehabilitation programs to keep people out of prison, but apparently free kinder – 'free' kinder, taxpayer-subsidised kinder – is a way to keep people out of prison.

I think we need a government with serious solutions. As you know, Deputy President, I am very interested in this space. I have done a lot of research in this space. I was chatting the other day to Jesuit Social Services, who have a lot of great ideas on how we can reform the justice system and actually invest in rehabilitation and reform, because criminal justice reform is not only an economic good, it is a moral good for society, for a person, for redemption and to get people back on track. They will then contribute to their communities and the economy as well and get the best start in life. Yet we have got a situation where we are paying upwards of \$150,000 a year, every year, to keep people in prison and the recidivism rate keeps going up. When you have got almost half of all prisoners, particularly in youth justice, returning to prison within two years, that is a deep concern. We should actually be investing into those programs that get people out of prison. I think this motion should be supported.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (14): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Noes (20): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Ambulance services

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:27): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that Victorian lives are being put at risk by the ongoing crisis within Ambulance Victoria that has seen:
 - (a) a reduction in mobile intensive care ambulance (MICA) services, including:
 - (i) a drop in the number of MICA paramedics;
 - (ii) large parts of the Victorian community being regularly left without MICA coverage;
 - (iii) a system that is dangerous and badly organised;
 - (iv) low morale and burnout amongst MICA paramedics;
 - (v) a disastrous rostering system;
 - (vi) insufficient funding to pay for shifts;
 - (b) an ageing fixed-wing aircraft fleet and issues that include:
 - (i) shortages in available aircraft due to maintenance;
 - (ii) an overworked and understaffed pilot workforce;
 - (iii) several pressurisation incidents;
- (2) expresses concern at the proposal by Ambulance Victoria to cut:
 - (a) MICA units from regional communities, including:
 - (i) Bairnsdale;
 - (ii) Sale;
 - (iii) Shepparton;
 - (iv) Swan Hill;
 - (v) Wangaratta;
 - (vi) Warrnambool;
 - (vii) Wodonga;
 - (viii) Wonthaggi;
 - (b) single-responder MICA units from regional communities, including:
 - (i) Ballarat;
 - (ii) Bendigo;
 - (iii) Horsham;
 - (iv) Morwell;
- (3) calls on the Allan Labor government to:
 - (a) properly resource Ambulance Victoria;
 - (b) immediately release publicly:
 - (i) the review into MICA by Ambulance Victoria's quality and safety committee, including their recommendations; and
 - (ii) the independent aviation safety audit into Ambulance Victoria's fixed-wing aircraft pressurisation incidents.

The motion is essentially raising many concerns around our ambulance service here in Victoria. There have been a number of reports over recent days and weeks that have highlighted some really very

concerning issues that are occurring. Even today there are reports that our fixed-wing aircraft have been grounded or there is nothing available – no pilots available, so there are no fixed-wing aircraft available – from 11 am to 10:30 pm tonight. What does that mean? That means that Victorian lives are being put at risk when you do not have those services available. I think it is incredibly concerning that that is the case. I note that when the Minister for Ambulance Services herself was asked about this question in question time just now she gave a general sort of statement which anyone could read out of an Ambulance Victoria annual report that there is 24-hour coverage being delivered by AV's fleet. That might be the case, but it is certainly not happening today considering what is going on and that it is being said that actually there are no pilots available and there are no fixed-wings. Now, I hope that that is not the case; I hope those reports are not accurate. But if they are, which I suspect they are given the information that is out there, this is a real concern.

It was only just a few days ago, on 28 January, that there were whistleblowers concerned over the maintenance issues around Ambulance Victoria aircraft. I want to just speak to this report where one paramedic said in relation to an incident when there was an issue with the pressurisation and breathing gear had dropped from the ceiling in midair – it was quite an alarming issue – that this is a common occurrence. These sorts of safety issues – well, in their words 'a litany of safety issues' – are happening all the time and plaguing the service's fleet of four fixed-wing planes. Now, if those planes are grounded because they are not getting proper maintenance and if those planes are being grounded because we do not have enough staff to staff them, that is putting the lives of Victorians at risk. These are paramedics that are speaking out now. They are speaking out in droves because they have had enough. They have had enough of the government's spin, the cover-ups and, quite frankly, the lies. They are doing all they can to care for the Victorian community, and they do an enormous job. They have been tremendous, and they continue to do that right across the state. But they are being let down. They are constantly being let down.

The motion that I am speaking to goes into these issues. It is around an ageing fixed-wing aircraft fleet and, as I said, the shortages in available aircraft due to maintenance, an overworked and understaffed pilot workforce and the issue I have raised around the several pressurisation incidents. My motion goes to this. I am concerned that since I read this motion in yesterday that this issue has arisen today. The very issues I was concerned about have eventuated today. But they are worse today because there are no fixed-wing air ambulances available in Victoria as I stand and speak right now. Now, I have had to use that service as a patient, coming from country Victoria, from my home, to go to St Vincent's, just across the road. I have experienced it; I know what they do. I am a former nurse and midwife; I know what they do. I know how hard they work. I know the extraordinary care they deliver. But this is where we are at here in Victoria in 2023, where we do not even have coverage. I find it stunning, but worse than that I find it so alarming.

Then we get to the very real issue around our MICA paramedics. We have had a drop in MICA paramedics, in the numbers, and the annual report says that. We have got around 581. But now we have got reports that there are going to be shortages in parts of Victoria because of the government cutting the resources. Again it is whistleblowers speaking out who are saying that the MICA system is in crisis, the rostering system is dangerous and that there are multiple issues around what is happening in regional Victoria. Paramedics are saying there is no strategic plan on how to develop the service and the MICA service. The government says, 'Oh, we've got a plan.' Well, no-one has seen it. They are keeping it secret like everything else they do. These paramedics are saying that morale within the service is at a point where it is so low. I am reading from this report, and it says:

But the sources say morale is low and burnout more common because although they are trained to do the very serious cases, often they are sent to ... minor incidents ...

They cannot do that. That is a problem with dispatch, and I am hearing from constituents the most extraordinary stories around dispatch – four ambulances turning up for a broken ankle, while for somebody else who has had a very serious fall, no ambulance is available. Something is going wrong. It is not working. There are real flaws in the system, and there are real issues that are causing Victorians

who need the service, who have paid their ambulance fees for years and years and years and who need it and expect it cannot get it. That is a common complaint that we hear of. I know Mrs Broad will speak to that, because she has been speaking to me about an issue in her electorate, in the Premier's own seat, where there are no ambulances available – nothing. Patients are being told there is a 5-hour wait.

Mr Davis reminded me a few minutes ago that when we were in government and he was the health minister we put in four ambulance stations, yet nothing is available for that local community. So you have got real issues in the system, real pressures, that are actually impacting Victorian lives. Now, paramedics have said regarding the MICA shortage that the government is going to cut services in regional Victoria, so a MICA unit in a regional area might only have one person. Obviously they attend emergencies, accidents and other incidents and start the emergency care while other backup arrives. That makes perfect sense. I think we all understand that these are highly trained, skilled paramedics. But they are going to be cut, so that is going to leave a whole swathe of very large areas in Victoria without any MICA service.

The government says, 'Well, we're looking at the system, and there are no cuts.' That is not what the whistleblowers are saying. They are saying that cuts are on the table. The government needs to rule out these cuts. These areas – and, Deputy President, they are areas that affect you – include Swan Hill, Bairnsdale, Sale, Wonthaggi, Warrnambool, Shepparton, Wodonga and Wangaratta. These areas are at risk of losing this MICA service that I have just spoken about, a very important service for those communities. What happens then? I mean, that is a very large area. When we think of those areas, let us just take Shepparton and Wangaratta – let us look at them, and Bendigo: if there are no ambulances there, that area is being left with absolutely no resource. So these are very severe and serious issues.

I wanted to raise the point about where the paramedic numbers have fallen to 581. I was just checking the number, and I am right – 581. They are falling. Paramedics are speaking out saying, 'Well, things have to be so bad for me to be doing this.' So they need the government's attention on this. They are not just going out there and saying everything is okay. They are desperate, and they are needing that support from government. The government will say, 'Well, we're investing X amount,' but there is something wrong with the way they are doing what they are doing. As I said, when you have got gaps in the MICA services and when you have got no fixed-wing aircraft servicing Victoria today, right now, then we have got a problem, and that is at the government's hands. It is at no-one else's hands in terms of what is going on.

The government in recent years has been blaming COVID. It cannot blame COVID any longer for these systemic failures. We need to be looking at it. We need a proper review into what is happening. What is happening in Ambulance Victoria? Why is their morale so low? Why are these issues constantly there? Why is Danny Hill, the union leader, saying it? He is saying how bad it is. He is saying how bad the morale is. He is talking about the issues, and he is backing up the paramedics' claims. For the government to dismiss him I find quite extraordinary. I mean, he sits right beside the government, but of course he sits right beside his paramedic members more closely, as he obviously should. I just want to quote from what Danny Hill said the other day:

He also said there was no doubt MICA faced a crisis and the system was "absolutely dangerous".

That is Danny Hill saying that. That is not me saying it through what I am hearing on the ground, it is Danny Hill. Again, I find it really alarming that there is at that level somebody saying it is absolutely dangerous. So when I say it is putting Victorian lives at risk, it is. And then we have got the wellbeing of the staff – and we have obviously had some tragic incidents amongst the ambulance service, which have rocked local communities – and the pressure that they are put under, the inability to have the support, and other issues that are arising throughout various communities in this state.

I just think that the minister needs to understand how dire this is, because there are so many situations where we hear about stories, whether it is 94-year-old Louise just a few kilometres away from the Alfred – falls over, broken pelvis, an ambulance cannot get to her. A non-emergency patient transport

arrives, yet they tell her to walk through her house to get onto that non-emergency patient transport to be transported to the Alfred and then to be told she has got a broken pelvis – incredible pain, but very dangerous to have such an injury. It took her 40 minutes to walk through her house, the poor woman – 94. She had to walk through her house with a fractured pelvis to get onto a stretcher because an ambulance was not available just a few kilometres from the Alfred. I just find it extraordinary. I find all these stories heartbreaking. Of course we understand things happen. But these are not one or two stories; these are stories every single day that just demonstrate the depth of issues that are running, and this government has no ability to fix them. They just think throwing money here or doing that is going to fix it. No, it needs more than that. Of course it needs proper resourcing, but we need to actually look at and identify the issues. There must be serious issues.

While I am speaking on the non-emergency patient transport issue, that review has been done, and I have spoken about that in the house before. The minister has that; the minister has had that for weeks. Well, what is she doing with it? What is happening to the non-emergency patient transport sector? What are they expected to do? The budget is in just a few months time, and some of their contracts are running out at the end of June. Some have been extended. Some do not want to extend their contracts; they want out because they are sick of subsidising Ambulance Victoria. They are raising money through the goodwill of the community and basically subsidising Ambulance Victoria because it is so hopeless. And that is at the hands of the government; that is at the hands of the minister. We have had a rotating door of ministers. We had a minister last year; she lasted about three months, four months. Obviously she could not handle the heat, so she has handballed it back to Minister for Health. It should never have been split from the health minister in the first place. That just demonstrates to you what the government want to try and hide and cover up. Ambulance services of course belongs together with the health portfolio. I was arguing it at the time when the government split it, but they wanted to try and con Victorians, which they are very good at doing, and say, 'Nothing to see here. That's not my responsibility. It's someone else's responsibility.' Having a rotating door of ministers does not help the community either and instil any confidence, and especially with a minister that is out of her depth.

As I said, my motion goes on to talk about cuts in those regional areas, but I did not mention the single responder MICA units from regional communities, including from Ballarat, Bendigo, Horsham and Morwell. As I said, those communities are going to be without those single responder MICA units, given what the whistleblowers are saying, and they are enormous areas of the state. We have to have those resources in place. We have to have an ability for our community to be serviced. We have got a growing population. We have got an ageing population. We have got a population that has been shut down and locked down for too long, and for too many their care has been deferred. They have not got the screening; they did not go to the doctor during that lockdown time. They are getting sicker, so there it is no wonder there is more demand on the system. Again, that is at the hands of the government. They made the decision to lock us down, not once or twice when everybody was understanding of that – six times.

The decisions made during that time and what we are seeing now – I cannot overestimate the impacts of some of those daft decisions by Daniel Andrews and his government. We are going to be paying the price for a long time, as I said, in deferred care and people getting sicker. And now we have got the government's health tax. At a time when we are trying to rebuild we have got the government's health tax that is hitting medical clinics – the GPs, the dentists, the allied health professionals – that is going to cause havoc across the health system, more demand on the ambulance services and more demand on our emergency departments. What is the answer? Urgent care centres. But go to the urgent care centre and it tells you on a notice to go to your GP.

I mean, the government has no idea how to manage health. They take the high moral ground on it, and they have actually buggered it up. We used to have the best health service in the world. Sadly, I am not sure we can say that anymore. It is no reflection on the hard workers in this state – the nurses and the doctors and everybody involved. They are doing their best. It is government policy and government decisions that have done this, and as a result, we are seeing failure after failure after failure, whether it

is in the response times – and the Victorian Agency for Health Information data backs that up. The latest VAHI data – just last week it finally came out for the quarter ending 31 December – says that the median wait time for an ambulance attending life-threatening incidents increased from the previous quarter to 8.97 minutes. In the words of the former Premier when he was health minister, every second counts. Well, it sure does – 8.97 minutes. They are getting bigger, those gaps, those wait times. And to have no services whatsoever, to be told there are no ambulances for 5 hours, is a disgrace. No Victorian should be told there is no ambulance for 5 hours, not one.

This is an important motion; it goes to the heart of caring for our community and of providing services. But the state is broke, and for all Victorians to get proper health services is getting harder. I urge all members to support this motion to clean this mess up.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (14:48): I am very keen to make a contribution in relation to Ms Crozier's motion, and can I put the government's position up-front that we completely reject the premise of this motion. We are not reducing any intensive care services within Ambulance Victoria. We will always as a government deliver the resources that our paramedics need to do the incredibly difficult and important job they do, day in and day out. In some ways I ought to thank Ms Crozier for moving this motion, because it does give the government an opportunity to go through in some detail the investments that we are making to support our paramedics, our frontline AV staff, but also it gives us the opportunity to correct some of the misinformation that is being peddled by those opposite. For example, Ms Crozier made a fairly inflammatory claim – and indeed the motion goes to this point – that there are going to be no resources available through the fixed-wing aircraft AV operates. That is not true. That is absolutely incorrect, and the advice from Ambulance Victoria is that the fixed-wing planes are operating today, right now.

This is an example of the kind of misinformation and the frankly lazy policy approach that we are seeing more and more from those opposite, where they come in here and kind of float allegations about what is going on in particular parts of service delivery that the government takes very seriously. So I will take the time. I do not know whether Ms Crozier will stay for my whole contribution to actually hear about what we are investing in and some of the systems that we are putting in place that are going to be absolutely world-leading and game changing for our hardworking paramedics. I am glad that you were the one to raise David Davis's time as the previous health minister, because when we think back to those times, we think back to when the government of the day, the coalition government, did not think twice about going to war with our ambos – calling them thugs, accusing them of manufacturing ramping allegations and inflating their pay in the media to try to turn the public against them. In stark contrast, our government will always listen to our paramedics and their representatives, work with them and give them the resources that they need. Whether it is our experienced advanced life support paramedics and our highly skilled MICA paramedics or the hundreds upon hundreds of graduate paramedics who have joined this important profession over recent years, this government values our paramedics and the life-saving work that they do each and every day.

When it comes to our ambulance services, I just do not think that the opposition has any credibility. When we came to government in 2014, our state's paramedic system was actually on its knees. It was underfunded and it was undervalued – and there was no global pandemic going on then, by the way; it was just a system that was grossly mismanaged. In the last budget the Liberals handed down in 2014 there was a paltry \$6.6 million provided in additional funding for our state's ambulance service, with a total output funding of \$696 million. Let us compare that to our government's most recent budget. In the last budget alone we provided more than \$120 million in additional funding for our ambos, with total funding for service delivery equalling nearly \$1.4 billion. That is double the annual investment of those opposite when they were last in government, and now they have suddenly decided that this is an important issue for them.

We can proudly say that Victoria has the best funded ambulance service in the country, because we do value the workforce and we have invested in our paramedics. I will go through some of those stats

because I think it is important for the house to understand where the investment is going that our government is providing. In 2014 when we came to government Ambulance Victoria had 3000 on-road clinical staff. Now there are more than 5000. That is a 58 per cent increase in the on-road clinical workforce – a 58 per cent increase in serving the community of Victoria right across the state. It is around 2000 more paramedics providing life-saving emergency health services to Victorians today than there were when we came to government.

But it is not just about numbers on the ground. We have also invested in the training, development and remuneration of our hardworking ambos because we value the work that they do. We have invested in new career pathways such as the novel medium-acuity transport service and our commitment to becoming the first jurisdiction in the country to introduce a paramedic practitioner service. This is something that is world-leading. Of course as we train and hire record numbers of paramedics we know we also need to upgrade the training facilities to ensure that there is sufficient capacity. That is why we have invested \$10 million towards an Australian-first centre for paramedicine in partnership with Victoria University. The centre will focus on training the next generation of ambos, providing advanced teaching methods with the capacity to train around 1500 paramedic students each year. That is the kind of systemic investment that will rebuild our ambulance service off the back of the pandemic and give the community the support that they need. VU currently provides one of Australasia's largest undergraduate programs in paramedicine with more than 800 students, and the new centre will continue the university's partnership with Ambulance Victoria.

Of course our ambulance workforce is diverse and it is made up of a variety of specialist skill sets, including the incredible mobile intensive care ambulance paramedics, or MICA paramedics, who I might add have been providing mobile intensive care to Victorians for more than 50 years. These on-road intensivists do play a really critical role in attending the most urgent of cases in our community, and we on this side of the chamber are extremely proud of our government's investment to grow this particular part of the workforce. When it comes to making sure that we have got a well-rounded ambulance workforce we have a strong record on this side of the house. In 2021 we introduced the innovative medium-acuity transport service. Just as our MICA paramedics support the most critical code 1 and code 0 cases, this important service is providing world-class care for our class 2 and 3 patients, with 22 vehicles on the road and 165 dedicated staff. The reason why this is an important service is it is helping to free up valuable resources to respond to the most urgent time-critical cases, allowing our MICA paramedics to focus on the critical care cases they have been trained for.

So we have seen historic investment in the first paramedic practitioner service in Australia. This is something that our government announced during the election campaign, that we would be providing additional investment in paramedics through the paramedic practitioner service, and that is something that can provide urgent care to patients who need it and eliminate the need for a trip to a hospital emergency department. Of course there are no prizes for guessing how that will alleviate pressure on the entire health system. We have invested \$20 million towards that endeavour.

These commitments highlight our ongoing commitment to the paramedic workforce, and we acknowledge that it is difficult work that they do. We will always back them in. We know that there is more work to do to get us back to those pre-pandemic record response times, but our government has the plan to do that, and we will continue to back them in.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (14:58): I rise to speak in support of this motion today, but I must note that the government actually had to send me the opposition's motion. They have not spoken to me themselves, which is very disappointing and does not really speak to their ambitions of passing it. But I did take the liberty of speaking to the ambulance workforce and their union, which is very accessible to me because I actually live with a paramedic and have for the best part of a decade. I have also been notified that the Ambulance Victoria fixed-wing fleet is grounded today from 10 am until 10:30 pm – no pilots, no planes – and it basically leaves Victoria's aeromedical service dysfunctional.

Victoria's MICA paramedics are some of the highest trained paramedics in the world. They can place you in an induced coma after a major car accident, an extremely high-risk procedure performed in hospital by multiple senior doctors and nurses. They resuscitate children who have drowned. They revert lethal heart rhythms, cut into your chest to fix a collapsed lung and administer adrenaline infusions for anaphylactic reactions. Some of my own election campaign volunteers are MICA paramedics, dedicating their working lives to helping the sickest and most injured Victorians in their darkest hours. But their skill and expertise are being taken for granted by a government who has let them down when they need our support the most.

To say Victoria's MICA paramedics are burnt out would be an understatement. Their working conditions are on life support. Many shifts go unfilled; fewer crews and the same workload denies Victorians the intensive care they need and deserve. A key contributor to this burnout is what is known as clock stopping – trying to plug holes in the sinking ship of ambulance response times. Our broken call-taking and dispatch system, which the government is well aware of, unnecessarily overtriages minor calls to 000 as life-threatening emergencies, tying up ambulance crews with patients who often need little more than a GP. The government tells you to save 000 for emergencies, but it cannot even work out what is and is not an emergency, so it sends our finite ambulance resources on a first-come, first-serve basis to sore throats, cat scratches and cut fingers, with MICA paramedics standing in the lounge room of a young, fit and healthy person, their intensive care skills unavailable, as they organise a GP appointment. When this happens 10 to 15 times on a 14-hour night shift, it is not only wasteful, it is downright dangerous. And when their skill set is needed, it is unavailable. On Sunday night the only MICA paramedic in Hume was in Wodonga, covering all the way down to Wallan and across to Bendigo. When a MICA paramedic from Bendigo is treating a heart attack in Horsham, you have got serious problems in the ambulance service. On 27 January this year, at approximately 3 am, a dispatcher told crews there was no MICA for a 200-kilometre radius in Melbourne. To retain the highly skilled MICA workforce, the government must look at revised ambulance dispatch and take its own advice – save ambulances, especially MICA ambulances, for genuine life-threatening emergencies.

Ambulance Victoria's latest annual report lists 525.7 qualified MICA paramedics. After nine years of a Labor government that vowed to end the ambulance crisis, a campaign that I worked on myself in the union movement, there are just 5.5 more qualified MICA paramedics now than in 2014 to 15, an increase of just 1 per cent, or just over half of one MICA paramedic per year of government. Even less than this number are able to be rostered due to significant physical and psychological injury, with many branch lines going unfilled in both metro and rural regions. It takes nearly five years to fully credential an independent and experienced MICA paramedic. Most have to take a pay cut to become MICA paramedics then face the pressures you have just heard – increased psychological exposure and burnout. You are right to ask yourself: why bother? The government must resuscitate Victoria's MICA service, but it is not simply a matter of breaking and replacing MICA paramedics. They are not machines. The government must address their working conditions and pay issues. Has the government learned from the mass MICA resignation in 2009, or is history going to repeat itself now?

Our paramedics are still recovering from the exhaustion of the pandemic, which is not over yet. Their reward is to be smashed like a piggy bank by this government. Do they think our paramedics do not have mortgages, school fees or bills coming in too? Do you really want a MICA paramedic stressing over how they are going to make ends meet when they are about to place you in an induced coma?

The Treasurer flagged in the *Age* last month cuts to health and education in the upcoming May budget. Ambulance Victoria is already cost-cutting, with last year's disastrous decision to cancel staff award ceremonies while hosting their own swanky event at Hotel Chadstone. Despite the blunder, the cuts have not stopped. Maintenance requests at branches are being denied due to lack of funding. In Mildura a branch with a collapsed roof had mould growing in the station. Despite opening in 2023, the Ararat MICA resource looks to be curtailed. Last week Grampians MICA paramedics were told

they will not be paid to drive to Ararat and Horsham MICA vacancies. A 2022 government media release stated:

Our MICA paramedics are highly skilled, and Ararat's new crew will ensure locals receive the best possible care.

Are these communities no longer deserving of the best possible care? An area with an ageing population, extreme agricultural injuries and major road collisions will have to wait for a MICA resource from Ballarat, if it is even available.

I am obviously not interested in pleasing the government at the moment, but I am very much in support of this motion today, even though it might not be perfect. I, and I am sure many Victorians, would much rather see this government pull money from their continuation of duck shooting in Victoria and redirect it into our health services that so desperately need it, because as the Labor government has continually reminded us, in an emergency every second counts.

Gaëlle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (15:05): I want to thank Ms Crozier for presenting this motion. It certainly has the Nationals' support. And I also want to thank Ms Purcell for outlining so many of the qualities of MICA paramedics and the many challenges that they face in the role and for her support of this motion.

According to reports in the *Herald Sun*, Ambulance Victoria is considering removing single-responder MICA units from regional areas, including Swan Hill, Shepparton, Wodonga and Wangaratta in Northern Victoria. Larger areas, like Bendigo, which are served by two-member MICA ambulances, would also be affected by the reallocation of resources. Despite ongoing ambulance delays, the Labor government is considering cutting back MICA services further, even though the most recent annual report shows the number of MICA responders has fallen.

Just two weeks ago a member of my family who lives in Victoria had their heart stop. They were at work at the time, and thankfully, another local just dropped in for a chat and was there when the incident happened. An ambulance was 45 minutes away, but within minutes a MICA arrived on the scene. They knew exactly what to do. Rather than sending them to the local hospital, they sent them straight to Bendigo Hospital and they followed behind. A pacemaker was put in the very next day. The actions and quick response of that paramedic helped save their life. This is just one story of someone that I know, but there are many, many more. On behalf of my family, I would like to say thank you to the MICA paramedics that serve our state.

According to news reports, MICA responders who are trained for complex and serious incidents face low morale and burnout and are regularly being called out to fill gaps in the regular ambulance service. This motion notes that Victorian lives are being put at risk by the ongoing crisis within Ambulance Victoria that has seen a reduction in mobile intensive care ambulance, or MICA, services, involving a drop in the number of MICA paramedics, large parts of the Victorian community being regularly left without MICA coverage, low morale and burnout amongst MICA paramedics, a disastrous rostering system, insufficient funding to pay for shifts and an ageing fixed-wing aircraft fleet with issues including an overworked and understaffed pilot workforce. Instead of cutting vital MICA resources the Allan government should be increasing services. Victoria's ambulance union has agreed the service is in crisis.

A lady contacted my office recently, and I spoke to her again this morning. She reported that at 5 am on 23 January she phoned for an ambulance as she was experiencing abdominal pain. The service called back at 5:15 am to advise that no ambulance was available, that it would be a 5-hour wait and that a taxi could be sent to her premises to take her to hospital. But she was in pain and feeling very faint and did not want to pass out in the taxi, so she declined the offer and her son drove her to the hospital. This is a lady that has paid her ambulance service fees for years, and when she needed an ambulance, one was not there. When she arrived at Bendigo Hospital and told the staff that there were

no ambulances available, they were very surprised because there were no ambulances at the hospital either.

Not that long ago I was contacted by a person, whose family live in Donald, about an elderly gentleman that had a fall in his own backyard 200 metres from the Donald hospital. He lay in pain on the concrete on his back in his backyard for 2 hours, waiting for an ambulance that was coming all the way from Horsham, and regrettably, that gentleman died the next morning.

Despite these issues, Labor are cutting services and resources across the state because the state is broke. Since it was elected almost a decade ago Labor has introduced 53 new or increased taxes and charges while blowing out Victoria's debt to record levels. We are now the highest taxing state in Australia. But despite this fact the Premier has signed Victoria up to build the Suburban Rail Loop in Melbourne and said that there is no turning back. Jacinta Allan has called the first stage a milestone; I call it a millstone around Victoria's neck. There are already 1000 people working on the Suburban Rail Loop project. By 2026 there will be 4000 and at the peak of the project 8000 people. According to the Parliamentary Budget Office, an independent assessor, this project is estimated to cost \$200 billion, yet the federal government has only committed \$2.2 billion. So where is the money coming from?

Labor cannot manage money and they cannot manage projects. They are boring ahead with the Suburban Rail Loop and digging our state deeper into debt while they cut services in regional areas. Our roads are not being maintained. We have 100-year-old bridges not being replaced. We have significant teacher vacancies. We have over 800 police vacancies. And now they are looking at cutting MICA services in regional areas. While they spend big on Melbourne projects, they are also hiking WorkCover premiums and expanding payroll and land taxes, all to go towards the debt. Victorians are currently paying \$15 million every day in interest because of this massive debt. By the end of 2027 we will be paying \$24 million every day.

Ms Stitt earlier referred to the need to listen to paramedics. Yes, we do, but also the government needs to be listening to the patients, because it is their stories that are telling the reality of what is happening on the ground. We are calling on the government to rule out any cuts to MICA services in regional Victoria and to properly resource Ambulance Victoria, so I am pleased to support this motion.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (15:12): I thank the Liberals for putting forward this motion today. However, the Greens will not be supporting this motion. We do see a lot of merit in the concerns being raised by the opposition, and I have to say we were very, very close to putting our support behind this motion. Victoria's ambulance system is undeniably overstretched and under-resourced. However, there are a few points in the motion that we have sought advice about that created sufficient uncertainty for us to be able to support it in its entirety in the absence of receiving any further evidence. Specifically, the motion calls for the release of two documents, one pertaining to a review into MICA that we have been advised may not actually exist – the review or the document – and the other about an independent aviation safety audit which has actually been released by Ambulance Victoria to aviation workers as far as we have been advised. Additionally, we have received conflicting information from different stakeholders about the claimed cuts to services in the motion. So based on this uncertainty the Greens are not in a position to support the motion.

However, I do want to speak briefly to the current state of Victoria's ambulance services and how they are reflective of the way this government's failure to adequately resource our healthcare system as a whole is creating increasing challenges for Victorians and their ability to access health care. I have spoken in this place before about the dangers of underfunding our preventative and primary care services. Trying to deal with conditions after they have developed is like putting ambulances at the bottom of a cliff and waiting for people to fall off, but in Victoria there may not even be an ambulance available to assist you at the bottom.

Issues with ambulance resourcing, which we hear repeatedly from paramedics and unions, are numerous. Our MICA paramedics are amongst the most highly skilled first responders in the world. I

have had the honour of working alongside these incredible professionals, and I have to say there have been several situations where I could not have been more relieved to see them turn up when I have been stuck in a GP clinic with a critically ill patient. Their pay and conditions have been chronically underwhelming, which in turn has made it difficult to attract and retain workers. There are poor rostering practices, which we have heard about, and the inadequate call-taking, dispatch and triage systems are driving misallocation of resources and further feeding pervasive low morale and burnout. To further elaborate, the misallocation occurs because MICA services are attending call-outs that do not need their expert level of skill. That also means, though, that they are not available for call-outs where they are absolutely vital.

Many MICA shifts are also going unfilled, and we have heard about some examples of that from other members this afternoon. Now, I have been assured that there are increases in MICA trainees in the pipeline, but this is going to take years to flow through and to fill the gaps, and there is still a lack of a plan to ensure that this will increase workforces in rural and regional areas, which have always struggled to attract healthcare workers. A lot of it has to do with how we are thinking about building our rural healthcare workforce. Forcing people to commute or relocate is never a sustainable answer to rural workforce shortages. There is a dire need to invest in local workforces, local people, training them up and recruiting them where they already are right across Victoria.

While our emergency services are under strain, so too we are seeing cracks all throughout our broader health system. There are the forgotten areas of health care like prevention, dental care and primary care that are key to reducing demand on acute services. Community-based care like dental and primary care are essential to ensuring that the baseline health of Victorians is as strong as it can be. But when people are not able to access this, an illness like a dental problem that might have easily been resolved is much more likely to be exacerbated and then lead to someone needing to call an ambulance. When the proportion of the population experiencing acute illness rises, so too does the demand for emergency care. To keep people out of ambulances and away from the hospital system, we have to properly invest in prevention and community health care.

We also need to recognise that COVID remains a driver of excess demand. This is not just a catch-up as the result of deferred care post pandemic, COVID is still here; it has not gone away, and many thousands of people continue to get seriously ill, placing additional demand on services. Also, it is continuing to diminish workforce capacity because people like our paramedics are getting ill as well.

Yet because investment in areas of health like population health, primary care and prevention does not involve fancy openings with ribbon cuttings and hard hats or make for neat announceables, they remain chronically ignored and underfunded by this government. We will never be able to keep up with demand if we keep relying on ambulances and hospitals to deal with all our health issues. On the other hand, there will always be a need for emergency care, for paramedics and our MICA specialist paramedics and for air ambulance services. In a resource-stressed environment where demand exceeds the system's ability to meet it, more must be done to support our paramedics, to improve efficiency in the system and to address rural and regional service shortages, and I urge the government to really, seriously take on board the many issues that have been raised as a result of this motion being brought to the Parliament today.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:18): For the second time today I rise to speak on a Liberal motion and for the second time today I rise to correct the record on this sloppy, shoddily put together motion. Just as this morning had some particular facts that were cherry-picked by the opposition to make a certain story look a certain way, here we just have absolute fictions in this motion. Starting with clause (3)(b)(i) that calls on the government to immediately release publicly:

the review into MICA by Ambulance Victoria's quality and safety committee, including their recommendations ...

What review? There is no such review. You are now calling us to release reviews that do not even exist. You then go on to call for:

the independent aviation safety audit into Ambulance Victoria's fixed-wing aircraft pressurisation incidents.

I have it on good authority, though, that relevant workforces pertinent to that issue already have that information. So here we go again, just another shoddily put together exercise by a very sloppy opposition. As I understand it, they could not even be bothered consulting with the crossbench over their motion, so I do not think they even really want this motion to get up today. But seeing as we are here and here to talk about it, let us go through what has been put up here today. I am more than happy to talk about this government's record when it comes to ambulance services. I am more than happy to talk about it, especially in contrast to those opposite.

First things first, it is very important to acknowledge the amazing work that all of our ambos do. They really are the heroes of our community. Every time I put up a post that is to do with ambulances, I will receive comments and messages from people talking about their experiences and how much they appreciate our local ambos too.

Mr Tarlamis is in the room. He joined me, the member for Cranbourne and the member for Bass just last week as we attended the official opening of Clyde North's brand new ambulance branch. Right there is a perfect example of the work we are doing to deliver ambulance services to our growing suburbs right across Victoria. It is a fantastic facility – a four-bay station, which is actually larger than most, so there is plenty of the capacity for future expansion. The site has been up and running since its soft launch back in November, and it has already had over 3000 call-outs. That is 3000 call-outs being served in that community by that community by our fantastic new ambulance station, and it is a great thing to see as well as of course all the new schools, the new roads and investment in all the other services going into that area. The new ambulance station is fantastic to see.

Just up the road from Clyde North of course we have Cranbourne, and those opposite might recall – or might not like to recall – that in the 1990s they actually privatised the Cranbourne ambulance service. And it went so well that the privatised ambos were having to ask neighbouring publicly owned ambulance stations for bandages. You would not even give them bandages. You absolutely ran it into the ground. The architect of that policy, Mr Kennett, I see is now stomping around Frankston and meeting people in Karingal. I am not sure if that is going to particularly help the Liberal candidate in Dunkley, but if you think that is the best strategy, then you go for it.

I do not need to go back to the 1990s of course either, do I, to see an example of the hostile way in which those opposite have treated our paramedics? We saw it in the last period of government under the Liberal-Nationals when the health minister at the time, Mr Davis himself, went on the absolute attack. Rather than supporting our ambos he went to war with them. He undermined them, he went to war with them. He had absolute zero respect for our hardworking ambulance workers. He went to the extent of calling them thugs, liars, militant stooges – extraordinarily disrespectful. I would like to see him try and do the job. He called them stooges apparently because he accused them of staging a fake photo at Frankston Hospital – another hospital that this government is investing in with a billion-dollar rebuild that is currently underway, mind you. He accused them of a fake photo stunt at Frankston Hospital, which actually was not true, so he was levelling all these rubbish accusations just as they like to throw out unfair accusations in this place as well. He attacked them for staging a photo which was not staged, and I just have to say it is extraordinary because I think those opposite know all about that.

We have the alleged incident in Colac in the last few weeks. Does the member for Polwarth know? Does he have the connections? He tells everyone that he has the connections. Surely he has them. The member for Hawthorn apparently thinks that this is a serious issue worth looking into, but the member for Polwarth says it is not. So did the Leader of the Opposition even talk to the Shadow Minister for Emergency Services before this? Clearly not. Clearly he has got no respect for his own Shadow Minister for Emergency Services. Perhaps the member for Polwarth has got no respect for the member for Hawthorn. Let us face it, over there it is probably both. They have absolutely no idea what they are

doing. This motion is another example of that, just as it was when they embarrassed themselves the other week as well.

Clearly they have very little confidence in each other over at the Liberal Party at the moment, but once again it just underscores the point that, whilst we have supported our paramedics in the 10 years that we have been government, those opposite as soon as they had the chance went to war with them. They called them thugs, liars, militant stooges. What a disgrace. What an absolute disgrace. When we stand here and we say that we support and we respect our paramedics, we mean it and we stand by it. Our \$2 billion investment over the life of this government in our ambulance service is testament to that. It is also evidenced by the fact that the last quarter, so from October to December 2023, was the second-busiest quarter in this state's history and despite this response times actually improved by 7 per cent over the last 12 months. Average code 1 response times are now under 15 minutes. Those opposite often like to forget this, but prior to the pandemic we had taken the response times from one of the worst in our history when we inherited government to the best response times on record –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Michael GALEA: You are clearly not listening to what I said, Ms Crozier. If you want to jump in halfway through, I suggest you actually listen to what I am saying.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Order! Mr Galea, we will have no debating across the chamber.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Acting President. The point I am making, if Ms Crozier had been listening to my full comments, is that over the 10 years of this government we have invested consistently, and that is why the on-road workforce is 50 per cent higher today than it was 10 years ago. We have of course had enormous population growth in that time too, but the 50 per cent increase shows that this is a government that is not going to sit on its laurels and let whatever happens happen or attack the ambos while they are struggling to make their jobs work. This is a government that actually supports them and grows the ambulance service in line with demand, and I again reference the fantastic new Clyde North ambulance station, which is already up and running and is already very successfully providing excellent support for patients right across the south-east. It is another fantastic example of that.

As I say, on this side of the house we strongly believe in supporting our paramedics, not attacking them and then using them as cover for shoddily put together motions that we obviously do not even care enough about to consult with the crossbench about. You just want to be here to grandstand again, as you like to do on a Wednesday, but if you actually wanted to do something meaningful, you would be talking to more people. You would be talking to all of them. You would be talking to us. You would be talking to make sure that the issues that you want to raise can actually get addressed. But what issues? As I say, you are now just finding fake reviews and calling out things that have already been released to the relevant workforces. The substantial things that you are looking for – as I say, you have not done your work properly, just as you did not on the youth justice motion this morning. Picking apart random facts here and there does not constitute an accurate narrative.

Georgie Crozier: You are so out of touch.

Michael GALEA: What is out of touch, Ms Crozier, would be to call our ambulance drivers and operators militant thug stooges, when we are the ones investing in our ambulance –

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Order!

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Acting President. This side of the house invests in our ambulance service. We will continue to do so. We have done so and we will always continue to do so, unlike the pathetic political stunts put up by those opposite, because we know not just from the 1990s but from

the 2010s as well what they would do if they were to get into government again. We know because it is what they have done. In two consecutive Liberal governments they have gone on the attack. They have cut, they have privatised, they have taken everything out of the ambulance service that they could and they have done everything to undermine our wonderful paramedics and our ambulance system. On this side of the house we are resolute in our support for them. We will continue to invest what we need to invest as our state grows, and we are very proud of our record on that as well. Where there is more to be done we are doing it, and what I have talked about today is an absolutely perfect example of that. This motion is absolute rubbish. I do not commend it to the house.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:28): Well, I might just take the tone down a little bit and not stand on a soapbox and feign huge distress and feign a whole lot of things, going back in history into the last century.

I would like to put on record some of the stats. These are statistics that are available on code 1 performances in my Eastern Victoria electorate. Most unfortunately, on this metric, code 1 performance data, the ambulance service has gone backwards. We are not receiving our ambulances in a timely manner, and the facts speak for themselves.

Let me provide this data to the house. In Bass Coast the performance data for the third quarter in 2018 was 63.9 per cent of the time; in Bass Coast in December this last year just gone, 59.1 per cent. Baw Baw was 72.9 per cent in 2018 – it has gone backwards to 64.6 per cent. I will continue on: in Latrobe Valley it was 78.1 per cent code 1 performance, and it has deteriorated to 73.5 per cent. Wellington was 57 per cent, and now it has gone back to 52.7 per cent. East Gippsland was 59 per cent; East Gippsland last month, 53 per cent. South Gippsland was 50.8 per cent, and it has gone backwards to 47.8 per cent. These are facts, and this is showing how significantly stretched and overreached and quite frankly lacking in state government support our ambulance services are, and therefore there are looking to be those potential budget cuts and indeed cuts to the MICA units. And I note that in Ms Crozier's motion 294, which I support entirely, the second part expresses concern about the proposal by Ambulance Victoria to cut MICA units from regional communities in my electorate, as specified in some of those sadly deteriorating statistics of Bairnsdale, Sale and also Wonthaggi, and also at that potential to cut first-responder units in the Morwell region as well.

Our litmus test for a service being operational and being well and healthy in itself is the lack of constituents coming in our door. Unfortunately, in the case of ambulance services – and we can throw ESTA in there for another headache about response times as well – I have had multiple people in recent times really frustrated with the services that are not serving the people of Victoria. I look at one of the recent instances involving a constituent and their son: a young man who was a farmhand, a farm operator – and good on him for doing that career – had to be ambulated to the eye and ear hospital. He waited 8 hours – 8 hours – to be transported in pain and was eventually dropped at the door by a taxi at a cost to the government of somewhere around \$1000. This is a young man working in an important industry and he has an injury – 8 hours. Whether or not that could have got to the serious point where he actually lost his eye, this is not what our young people need nor what we expect when we pick up the phone in an emergency situation and call for help. Interestingly enough and unfortunately when his time in hospital was terminated, he had to find his own way home. Thankfully, he has parents who are very important and very supportive and were able to support him and get him back home safely.

Another thing that is reflected in my electorate and relates to certainly the Morwell electorate is this funding of a Morwell ambulance station. There was a big sign up in the Morwell zone, in the place where it was to be built in English Street, and the sign has actually faded and fallen over. 'We're going to build this new ambulance station', and it just seems to me that there are a lot of promises made, and certainly many people in our electorates are not receiving those estimations of those high promises.

There have been others: I know recently a gentleman was riding his pushbike and fell off his pushbike and was told that he could wait for a period of time – do not be moved but wait for a period of time –

and it was a lengthy period of time until an ambulance came. Indeed his skin was punctured by the broken leg – a compound fracture would be the technical term – and he was told to wait exactly where he was. Well, he broke his leg in the middle of a road, so how sensible was it that he was told that, just due to shortages and stress.

I must say I have the unfortunate – or fortunate – experience of having firsthand knowledge of being on the inside of an ambulance a few years ago, and I cannot speak of it highly enough. When we, as human beings, are in our most vulnerable state – all my experiences have been very positive and calming, with reassuring professionalism. And only recently I was speaking to somebody who was a patient transfer operator. They have a very uncomfortable position. Whereas we, as those being transported, are always in a comfortable position, they are often bumping up and down. They often – and I am sure it is a common reflection – do not have lunch that day because they need to be in one spot, travel long distances in the country and get to where they needed to be.

In short, the government I think has been derelict in its duties in relation to supporting our state emergency services. We have seen it in the CFA and we have seen it in our hospital systems, where people cannot get a bed to save themselves. Thankfully, in the country all of the staff do the most amazing work to pool and to find solutions, but they are working uphill. I support Ms Crozier's motion in the house today.

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (15:36): I do not think anyone can deny that there are major issues of concern in the Victorian ambulance service, and over the last 30 years that I have been involved in health and community services it has been forever thus. We need look no further than the recent WorkCover inquiry or the services' ongoing recruitment and retention woes to provide compelling evidence of this reality. Likewise, the submissions from Ms Purcell and Dr Mansfield provided excellent life experience of reality in the service.

I do not know how many people understand the nature of the work that ambos undertake. Some years ago I did a project with the New South Wales ambulance service and their union. We travelled all over New South Wales talking to union reps and to local management, trying to develop better consultative processes and to address the challenges that these workers face, and we spent many hours talking about the reality of life on the road. I learned firsthand that being an ambo is hard physical and emotional territory. Ambos and especially paramedics regularly encounter and must address scenes of heart-wrenching disaster, of folly and of tragic consequences, of situations where their exceptional skills literally mean the difference between life and death, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. And then, in a jarring contrast, they may next, frustratingly, find themselves for hours ramped at a hospital, waiting for the emergency department to clear while work that requires their skills and dedication is delayed or even goes unanswered. This is a difficult life that requires extraordinarily skilled and committed staff.

In this context it is deeply disturbing that a range of sensible improvements to the working lives of ambulance officers have largely been rejected by the government. The ambulance union is seeking improved occupational health and safety conditions, safer staffing levels and better protocols in control rooms, more flexible working arrangements and a pay rise that at least keeps track with the cost of living so that they do not become poorer for the privilege of their work – outrageous demands, aren't they? To the government we say: if you value this critical workforce, you need to put your money where your mouth is.

But at the same time we should recognise that there are a range of factors, many of them arising from the pandemic, both past, present and continuing, that have hit many employers, including the ambulance service. Employers everywhere are struggling to find skilled staff, and it would be foolhardy to imagine that the ambulance service is somehow immune. There are some positive initiatives underway, which is great to see. Last year I attended a ceremony with Victoria University and Brimbank City Council to start the process of establishing a dedicated paramedic training school. Like all such initiatives, however, it will take time to establish and then to ultimately replenish the

workforce, and as I said before, these are highly skilled and trained health professionals and such programs take time to bear fruit.

To come to this motion, we have not had much time to consider it, and that is a real pity. I mirror the comments of Ms Purcell and the Greens with regard to the lack of opportunity to discuss this motion before it was presented in this place. As I have said, there are patently major problems in the Victorian ambulance service. I think that it is regrettable that this motion is mainly restricted purely to MICA, as I am sure all ambos would agree that MICA only really works in the context of a well-organised service, appropriately tasked across the full range of required assignments and to look at their position in isolation fails to do justice to the complexities of the problems. In terms of the actions that are sought in this motion, we agree that the ambulance service should be resourced appropriately. Who wouldn't? I doubt that anyone in Victoria would dispute this principle, but the question is: what does it mean? I am old enough and sufficiently steeped in the health industry to remember what adequate funding of the ambulance service meant under successive coalition governments going back to the Kennett days, and it was not pretty. As I mentioned previously, the motion seems to concentrate only on MICA and the air wing, and we all know that this is only a small part of the problem.

On the question of the documents sought, we accept on face value the undertakings provided by the government – that is, that there is no review into MICA by Ambulance Victoria that can be provided or that exists and that the safety audit by Pel-Air has been distributed to all relevant staff. In this regard it seems to us that the motion is basically mistargeted. Accordingly, we will not be supporting the resolution.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:42): I also rise to make a contribution on this motion, motion 294 in Ms Crozier's name in regard to the Victorian ambulance service. It lists a range of premises, which a number of speakers in the chamber today have disagreed with, and I also disagree with the premise of this motion for a range of reasons. But before I begin my contribution, I just want to do a big shout-out to all of our hardworking and dedicated ambulance service workers who work so hard each and every single day keeping Victorians safe. It is an incredibly difficult job working in our ambulance service or being a paramedic, because as we know they have to turn up in the most difficult of circumstances when Victorians need them the most.

A member: They are on our front line.

Sonja TERPSTRA: They are our frontline workers. Whether there has been a tragic accident, whether there is an accident in the workplace or a vehicle accident or whether there is a slip or a trip or a fall at home, our ambos are there when we need them the most and in a very calm and reassuring way. Just recently I was walking my dog near my house, and of course I am fortunate enough to have many friends in my neighbourhood. Not many people might have that, so maybe those opposite might be looking for some friends. I do not have that issue. I have got plenty of friends in my neighbourhood. But I did see an ambo call to the house of a person who I knew. We did not know it at the time, but an elderly resident had had a stroke. I have to say that the ambulance officers who attended that scene were the most calm and reassuring people. I was a stranger to them, and obviously I was concerned for the person who was being attended to. But they were very lovely and answered my questions. I just said, 'Look, I know the person. Is there anything I can do? Has the person's family been notified?' et cetera. But they were lovely, calm, reassuring and took fantastic care of the person who was the patient and took them to the local hospital for them to be cared for in the hospital.

We rely on our ambulance services. They are very important part of our community and our fabric, and the people who do this job are just fantastic individuals. It takes a special kind of person to actually do this job. I know we have debated in this chamber before, even in regard to our emergency call takers – I could not imagine what it is to do this kind of job and this kind of work. It is the Allan Labor government who actually supports our frontline workers. I heard Mr Galea in his contribution earlier remark upon the attacks that happened under the Liberal government when Mr Davis was Minister for Health. Everyone in this chamber knows that the war on paramedics and the ambulance service that

those opposite engaged in when they were in government was terrible. It took a Labor government to fix the ambulance crisis. We fixed that, and that is something we are very proud of. Our Labor government has a history of supporting not only our ambulance services but also our other health and frontline workers and funding our hospital services appropriately as well. I have great respect and admiration for our frontline workers.

In the motion that Ms Crozier has moved there is a false premise. It talks about that we are making cuts. I will go through some of the things that demonstrate that this actually cannot be the case, because we are investing in training new paramedics and the like. Why would we go and train people and make available free education and training for workers to be skilled in this field only to cut them? It does not make any sense. It does not make any sense to me, anyway.

Nevertheless, the motion does provide us with an opportunity to put some facts on the table. First of all, prior to the onset of the pandemic it was under this government that Ambulance Victoria recorded their best response time on record, which was nearly 10 per cent higher than what we inherited from the opposition when they were in government. This is on the back of the \$2 billion investment that our government has made into ambulance services, which has seen our on-road workforce increase by over 50 per cent since coming to government. That is what I was saying about this idea that we are making cuts: why would we make cuts to something that we have invested so heavily in so we can have more paramedics and improve the service? As I said, as part of the investment we have increased the workforce by over 50 per cent since coming to government. As part of that investment since 2015 we have invested \$279 million to deliver or upgrade 35 new ambulance stations across the state, with 16 others underway.

In the last term it was great to see the new Doncaster ambulance branch reopen. It is based at Templestowe. I attended the opening of that ambulance branch. Under the previous government there was a consolidation and closure of some ambulance stations. I know my local community, particularly residents in Templestowe and Doncaster and those areas, were very pleased to see the reopening of that ambulance station. As I said, I attended the opening of that ambulance station. At the time, Martin Foley was the Minister for Health and Minister for Ambulance Services, and we attended and opened that station. It is a beautiful, brand new, state-of-the-art facility. Having it based locally in Templestowe and Doncaster gives comfort to local community members. Having it there means that there is another ambulance branch, another ambulance service, located in that area. Again, we talk about response times, but those opposite closed ambulance stations, right? How can you get an ambulance somewhere if you do not have them locally based? It is a strange premise, this whole notion.

With those upgraded ambulance stations we also provide better working conditions for paramedics to ensure that life-saving emergency care is available for Victorians no matter where they live. As I said, if you want to improve response times, you have got to have more of those branches open and available to get the ambulances to where they need to go.

Of course ambulance services across the world have been significantly impacted by the pandemic. We know not only ambulance services but also our health and hospital system have been impacted by this. On Friday the minister released the latest quarterly data, which showed that it was the second-busiest quarter in the history of Ambulance Victoria, more than 30 per cent higher than prepandemic levels and only 400 code 1 cases short of the record from 12 months prior. Despite this, Ambulance Victoria's code 1 response time improved 7 per cent in the past 12 months, with the average code 1 response time now back under 15 minutes. What this demonstrates is that this government knows and understands – when we need to make further investments, we do that. We respond appropriately to ensure that those service levels can be maintained, and that is something we do by listening to our hardworking ambos and responding as appropriate. Again, Ambulance Victoria is not reducing any intensive care services, and we will always deliver our paramedics the resources they need. As I said, we have invested since we came to office \$2 billion – and since 2015, \$279 million – to deliver and

upgrade new ambulance stations. Again, what we can lay out in terms of facts just does not bear out in terms of Ms Crozier's motion.

Victorians can be sure that the pipeline of mobile intensive care ambulance paramedics is strong. As I said, there are courses for people who want to go and train as paramedics. The government is supporting that. Last year we saw record numbers of MICA interns in training, and we will see a further boost in MICA numbers this year, all of whom will be placed across the state. There are 131 MICA interns in various phases of training today, and we thank all of them for their service.

Nick McGowan interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Are you right there, Mr McGowan? It is just the groan. I thought, 'What have you done – you injured yourself?'

In the last budget we delivered our election commitment, with \$15.8 million in funding to train 40 additional MICA paramedics, which will continue to grow our MICA workforce. So again, the premise of this motion is just completely and utterly flawed.

I note the clock is running down and I will not get to make the rest of my contribution, but I know others before me have covered these topics as well. I just say that the motion is fundamentally flawed. It is poorly framed and based on false premises. I have laid out just some of the reasons that demonstrate we are not making cuts to ambulance services, and it is quite flawed. With all of the investment in training new MICA paramedics to come through the pipeline there is a strong pipeline of workers that we know will be well utilised in the ambulance service, giving Victorians comfort and confidence in the ambulance services. I will leave my contribution there, and I would not commend this motion to the house. We will be voting against it.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:52): I am not surprised the government will not be supporting this motion. The motion is going to the heart of the issue around patient outcomes, around caring for our community and around supporting our ambulance services. Clearly there are many paramedics that are speaking out now to the media, and not just one or two; there are many paramedics that are speaking out because they are concerned. They are talking about the dangerous situations that they are finding themselves in. They are worried about the resources that they have at hand, whether it is a fixed-wing aircraft not flying or whether it is ambulances that are not able to cover the regions that they want to work in, and they are supposed to be able to support those communities.

This is what this motion is talking about, yet the government keeps harping about what happened 10 years ago or last century. They are not interested in the outcomes for Victorian patients, and that is what really concerns me. This government does not care about patients. We have heard the examples. Mrs Broad spoke about what happened to her patient yesterday, waiting 5 hours in a large regional centre like Bendigo – 5 hours. How is that right in 2024 that no ambulance is available for 5 hours? How is it possible that there is no fixed-wing aircraft flying? There might be a chopper, but I am talking fixed-wing. There seems to be some contention about here. I am concerned that I might have misled the house – or has the minister misled the house? I am very happy to correct the record if I am wrong, but I believe I am right. Ms Purcell understood, and she stood up and spoke about the clear issues, having that firsthand from the contacts. She is clearly very understanding of the issues. I know people too that work in the system. They are doing their best, but they do want to have a look at those issues and not have them brushed under the carpet, like this government is doing.

The issues I raise are the issues that are being raised by paramedics. They are talking about low morale, a disastrous rostering system, a shortage in available aircraft due to maintenance, an overworked and understaffed pilot workforce and the mobile intensive care ambulance units that are going to be cut in areas like Bairnsdale, Sale, Shepparton, Swan Hill, Wangaratta, Warrnambool, Wodonga, Wonthaggi and – looking at those single-responder MICA units – in other regional areas such as Ballarat, Bendigo, Horsham and Morwell that will also be affected by the changes that are proposed. That is what the paramedics are saying. The government has just said that there is no review or there is nothing to see

here. We need to understand what is going on. We have not got the non-emergency patient transport review. Well, the minister has got it; she has been sitting on it. But these are the things that Victorians expect. When the government says, 'Well, we're putting in record funding,' but in actual fact the outcomes are getting worse, then there is something wrong, seriously wrong. So it is looking at what is happening. Where is this going? Is there waste and mismanagement?

We know the government cannot manage money. We know the state is broke. Look at our bottom line. Look at what is happening around the state. Look at the projects that have been absolutely blown to smithereens with their budgets. That money should have been directed into areas like health. I have been saying that for years, and I will continue to say it. I actually want to see better patient outcomes. Yes, we have got a growing population. But this population has grown in the last decade, and we have got an increasing complexity, as I explained before, due to the outcomes of COVID. So there are many issues. I am not saying it is easy, but I am not saying that the government has got it right, and I am sick to death of them spruiking that they are the only ones that know how to manage health when in actual fact they have buggered up health. The stories I continue to hear distress me no end, and they are the stories my colleagues are hearing the whole time. All we hear from the government are potshots about a former minister from a decade ago. I mean, that is what is concerning.

My focus is on patient outcomes, on these paramedics that are working in the system to ensure that they can provide the best care they possibly can, and they do endeavour to do that every single minute of every single day. I know that. It is not critical of them. It is government policy, government decisions and government budget cuts. I urge all members to support my motion.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (15): Melina Bath, Gaele Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Georgie Purcell, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Noes (19): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Enver Erdogan, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Samantha Ratnam, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (16:04): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 292, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Firewood collection

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (16:04): I move:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

- (a) the Supreme Court's decision to place injunctions on rural firewood collection by licensed community foresters has resulted in a surge in illegal firewood collection on public land;
- (b) the collection of illegal firewood is in direct response to the need for people to use fires for cooking and heating, especially those who cannot afford alternative means;
- (c) deadwood is the easiest wood to collect and is most likely to be a habitat tree for native animals;

- (2) calls on the government to:
- (a) explore solutions to the current lack of available firewood for collection to satisfy the need for cheap and efficient fuel whilst not placing habitats at undue risk;
 - (b) extend the current commercial firewood collection permits until an alternate system is made available to ensure continued firewood supply to older Victorians and people who are unable to collect their own firewood; and
 - (c) remove the domestic firewood collection seasonal restrictions.

This strangely came about from a call from a hunter that was quite upset that in his local area people were cutting down habitat trees. It may surprise people, but a lot of hunters are environmentalists. I looked into it a bit more – and this was way out west actually; it had nothing to do with my own area – and what was happening was that illegal firewood collection close to public roads was just going off tap. So with a little bit of work I found out why. It is because the current system has become so onerous. People were just resorting to illegal methods. Obviously when you are out in the middle of nowhere at some time during the middle of the day, there are very few people around to catch you. Now, there are fallen trees and there is this and that, but what came to my person's attention was people taking down habitat trees for possums and various rosellas and things like that. The problem is you look at it, if you want the firewood, and the easiest one to cut, process and sell is one that is already dead and has already gone through the drying out process. So out come the chainsaws, down it goes and little thought is given to what is happening. As time goes on those habitat trees are getting further into the forest and harder and harder to find, and that is going to have a negative effect on a lot of the animals.

It is something that I think I have talked to from time to time, as we have been here, and that is what the firewood is used for. It is easy for us in town. It is easy for us on pretty good coin to say, 'Oh well, people can use electricity' – I mean, gas is on its way out, which is another story – but there are a lot of people who just cannot do that. There are a lot of people who for reasons of whether it is just being remote or being unable to afford it cannot tap into an alternative supply. They cannot afford to put a solar panel on their house or whatever it might be.

I have mentioned this before a couple of times. When we first came to Victoria, which was a long time ago, we went to live on a farm just outside a rural town. My dad was an air force pilot, so I had not seen poverty. I had lived overseas; I had seen, I guess, poverty in another country but I did not think poverty existed in our country. Well, my eyes were opened. People were working 12-, 14-, 16-hour days on a farm, and they were basically getting enough to pay the bills and barely enough to feed themselves and pay for what they could for their kids and things like that. So you had people with crappy old cars – excuse the language – and you had people with houses that were quite run down and unsafe. To their credit, the kids were always fed and looked after and at school. But there is poverty in Australia and it goes under the radar because of the way we measure it. A farm may have an income of a million bucks a year but if your expenses are \$999,000, you make a dollar profit. It is still technically profitable, but you are not moving forward.

With the whole firewood thing, some people want it for the ambience. I do love an open fire, I love camping and I love the whole feel of it, but for some people it is not about ambience and not about cooking a steak over a fire, it is about heating themselves and it is about cooking. You know, in some of these places, even in central Victoria where I lived, it would get down to freezing overnight. It is mid-40s for a couple of months and then it is minus 1 or minus 2 degrees. So these people are not doing it just because they want to.

I remember when the firewood collection first started. The restrictions just grow more and more and more. I guess I can echo some of what Mr Limbrick said about how over-regulating something breeds illegal activity, and that is what is happening. The Supreme Court has not helped with some of the stuff it has done. No matter what your opinion is of the storm-damaged wood that is sitting there in I think it is the Bunyip State Park and could have been firewood, it is just going to sit there and go to waste now.

There are a couple of reasons why I came up with this, and that is pretty well where I am at. You can fine people for doing illegal stuff, but like most of these things the trick is to find that fine line between incentivising people to not do something and taking it to the point where they are just willing to take the risk. Frankly I think the current system is creating the problem. With regulated firewood collection – and that is fair – people will go to whatever area, whatever time. I do call on the government to remove the seasonal restrictions. If it is done properly, people will obey the laws, and that is what I am trying to get at. People will be able to collect their firewood from the places where it has the least effect and will not need to chop down habitat trees.

There was some concern about firewood and open and closed Coonara-type fires and the emissions they have. Again, it is all fine for people like us to say that, but when you have got a choice between going cold and not having hot food – and in some cases it really is that desperate – there need to be allowances made. Not everyone lives in the metro Melbourne area, not everyone has connection to an electricity grid and not everyone can afford solar, as I have said before.

There is still a cohort in Australia that I honestly did not think existed, and I still see them from time to time. We come across them in our travels. They are proud, they are hardworking, they are not on the dole and they do not want anything from anyone except a fair go – and in this case, heat. With the environmental damage that it is causing – it is a very targeted environmental damage – and the fiscal unfairness that this is creating, we are basically forcing this to happen. It is a law of unintended consequences. To be frank, I did not even think about it when this went through – I opposed the restrictions anyway just because of the people needing it for their wood – but the fact that the habitat trees were going to be the first line off never occurred to me and obviously never occurred to anyone else. You can put a fence around these things if you want, but someone is still going to come in and cut them down if they are the path of least resistance, the easiest ones to get.

So that is what I am trying to do. Why I am calling on the government to explore solutions is that obviously we control laws in here – it is the government's job to get it through. I think we need to revisit this. We need to get the current commercial firewood collection permits extended until we find an alternative system. One of the things is that older Victorians are not able to just pick up a chainsaw and go out and do their own thing anymore. There still is the need for the commercial ones. Again, by making a system fairer and easier to abide by you get rid of the backyard operators. And of course supply and demand – if there is a small amount of firewood you can get, the price goes up. If you can increase the pool, the price will go down and therefore it becomes a bit fairer. That is kind of where this is coming from.

I want the government to take this seriously. It is something I have done, and I look forward to further conversations with them. I will be critical of the government – it has lacked, until recently, a very rural and regional focus, and these sorts of things have just gone through. I do not want wholesale destruction of forests. It needs to be done properly. It needs to be done in a way where maybe it has been harvested before. No-one wants to chop down old growth or anything like that. The long and the short of it is we need to look at it from a high level, not just from the point of people being cold and people worrying about the environment and also emissions. We need to look at it from the point of view that we must actually get a system that people can abide by.

I will just quickly recap before I sit down. This started I suppose because of the green warfare problem we have all got. I am going to stray into the forestry part here. Some of the injunctions that were being used were just patently unfair and part of what I see as a wider problem with not even the environmental movement but a very hardcore part of the people that have one view forward and that is it. Once that started to happen it kept on going, and then you got injunctions on collecting wood in places where was quite safe, practical and reasonable to take firewood. We are not talking about taking trees that are 4 metres wide; that is not very practical. We are talking about the smaller stuff – blowdown trees or whatever – where you take enough. If it is dead, you cut it up, as long it is not habitat tree, but if you have to take down some of the less old trees and have them dry for the year after, you do it.

In wrapping up, the government really should in my opinion just extend the commercial firewood collection permits and make an alternative system available that works for everyone. I mean, this is a motion in the house; it is not making legislation. It is bringing to people's attention – the government's attention – that we need to deal with this, and I commend my motion of course to the house.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:17): I rise today to speak on this motion and affirm that the government is taking this issue very seriously. We know many people around our state, especially in regional and rural areas, rely on firewood to stay warm during winter and to cook their food. That is why this government will continue to support the provision of firewood supply for regional Victorians.

From 1 September 2011 onwards Victorians have been able to collect domestic firewood at no cost and without a permit from specific firewood collection areas, or FCAs, during designated firewood collection seasons. The ability to access free domestic firewood from designated Victorian state forest collection areas administered by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, DEECA, is not affected by changes to the native timber industry.

While domestic firewood is free to collect from state forests in Victoria, there is a cost to make it available to the community, and this means domestic firewood needs to be managed responsibly. The Allan government aims to carefully manage access to firewood from public forests for domestic purposes in a fair and sustainable manner for all Victorians. Firewood is an unpredictable and limited resource, and demand will exceed supply in some areas of our state. Firewood collected during the spring and autumn collection season needs at least eight to 12 months to cure and be dry before use. Collection limits are in place to ensure there is enough firewood for people who rely on it as their only source of heating. Where domestic supply is low, priority access can be limited to particular community members, such as local residents, traditional owners and those who depend on firewood for heating. Therefore I cannot support this motion, which will destabilise this fragile balance.

Last spring collection season there were over 250 sites open across the state for domestic firewood collection, which is an increase from the previous collection seasons. Currently there are two domestic firewood collection seasons throughout the year. The first is from 1 March to 30 June and the second from 1 September to 30 November. Collection season lengths are legislated to keep Victorians who collect domestic firewood and those who live in surrounding communities safe. Collecting firewood with chainsaws in the summer months increases the risk of sparks starting a forest fire. Collecting firewood in the winter months is dangerous due to the slippery and sometimes muddy conditions of most collection areas at that time.

I would say to you that each Victorian is allocated a quota of 2 cubic metres per day to a maximum of 16 cubic metres per household per financial year. The rules for domestic firewood collection are contained in the Forests (Domestic Firewood) Regulations 2022 and Crown Land (Reserves) (Domestic Firewood) Regulations 2022. Firewood collection areas are selected and prepared in accordance with the firewood collection management framework. Their location and opening days are then advertised to the Victorian community. There are a total of 254 firewood collection areas throughout Victoria, ranging from Barwon to Port Phillip to the Grampians. Since we came to government in 2014 we have invested over \$582 million in biodiversity, and this is the largest investment by a Victorian government ever. Compliance with firewood collection rules forms an important part of maintaining this biodiversity, because illegal collection can negatively affect forest health, wildlife habitat and public safety. We commend Victorians who comply with the collection limit of 2 cubic metres per person per day and a maximum of 16 cubic metres per household per financial year. The firewood strategy refresh was completed in late 2018 to improve the management of domestic firewood collection. As such, authorised officers regularly patrol parks, forests and reserves to promote compliance with firewood collection rules.

Permits support continued monitoring to ensure that relevant regional limits for how much domestic firewood a person can take are adhered to. Unlike the previous government, which removed the

requirement for a permit to collect domestic firewood, the Allan Labor government remains committed to ensuring safe access to domestic firewood without unduly compromising forest health and wildlife habitat.

But that is not all – this government also provides a range of concession programs to support Victorians to buy the firewood they need, broadening support for Victorians in need. This is the non-mains energy concession. Victorian households that rely on non-mains energy, including firewood, as their only source of heating can apply for the non-mains energy concession, and there is an annual rebate of between \$51 and \$575. It is available depending on your energy bills. There is also the non-mains utility relief grant. This is for Victorians on low income with or without a concession card who rely on non-mains energy, including firewood, and have experienced unexpected financial hardship. They can apply for the non-mains utility relief grant, and that is for up to \$650. Victorians can apply for the grant if they have an amount owing for a previous firewood purchase or indeed for their next purchase.

I understand that this motion is being made in response to a Supreme Court decision that impacts the native forestry sector. This government understands that the uncertainty brought about by legal proceedings has been challenging for forest produce licensees who have made a living from community forestry operations, and we continue to support this industry. All these licence-holders are eligible for the community forest support packages, but please let me be clear – the Supreme Court brought about an early end to community forestry, not the state government. VicForests' decision to cease all community forestry operations by 5 February 2024, following the Supreme Court's decision to extend indefinite injunctions against community forestry operations, was not a decision made by this government. The Supreme Court's decision has made it impossible for VicForests to facilitate community forestry operations through the extensive survey requirements imposed. This motion calls for the government to extend the commercial firewood collection permits, and that really is not an option, as the Supreme Court decision would make the disregarding of this decision illegal. It would expose 50-odd small – two- to three-person, in many cases – family businesses to enormous legal risk. We will not expose everyday family businesses to millions of dollars in legal fees. It is simply unacceptable, and really it is no solution at all. We cannot stick our heads in the sand and ignore the fact that the settings have changed, and we are not in denial about the change in the legal environment. This government has moved to provide native forestry workers with certainty about their future.

However, it is important to keep this conversation in perspective as well. You see, based on the latest CSIRO data, VicForests, even when operating at full capacity, which it has been unable to do for some time, contributes around 2 per cent of Victoria's annual firewood consumption of, extraordinarily, 1.6 million tonnes of firewood a year. This government will continue to work with forestry produce licence holders as they transition away from native timber operations, as we have continued to do with all impacted forestry workers. This government is not in the business of leaving workers behind and in limbo. We welcome the opportunity to continue to work with timber communities in identifying opportunities for more jobs and growth in sectors that will continue to drive a sustainable future for more Victorians. The Allan Labor government is committed to providing \$1.2 billion in funding to continue delivering support to businesses, workers and communities that are affected by forestry transition.

As for future supply solutions, I would like to thank DEECA for working on solutions for future sources of supply. Future firewood supply will be supported through a range of pathways, including private native forestry operations, plantations and the by-product of DEECA land management activities, which are undertaken for forest health and fire risk reduction purposes. These avenues are unaffected by the decision to end commercial native timber harvesting in state forests, and I have spoken about that before. The Allan Labor government takes firewood supply very seriously. We have got a range of measures in place to support Victorians to get free access to firewood or to subsidise the cost of access. As outlined throughout my time in this contribution, the proposals put forward in this motion are simply really unworkable, and this government remains committed to the support it has provided to those at risk who rely on firewood while balancing the needs of environmental protection.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:26): I thank Mr Bourman for bringing forward this motion, which is essentially about fire, one of humanity's greatest technological achievements – the thing that helped us make food safe to eat, gave us light at night, kept away predators and even to this day keeps us warm. Yet again we are talking about black markets due to over-regulation.

A member interjected.

David LIMBRICK: Yes, we are. We have this crazy situation where even this technological achievement is becoming difficult because of the way that these forests are being managed. I would like to see people be able to get firewood, because especially out in Mr Bourman's area, where my family lives, there are lots of people that still rely on firewood for their homes. I can concur with what Mr Bourman said: that many of them are low income. In fact I met a charity group at one point who were going around collecting and delivering firewood to older people, because older people cannot easily manage it themselves – it is a lot of work to collect wood and chop it and everything. Even my parents still have a wood stove, and it is a lot of work for older people to do that. They need to be able to have access to it, because many of them still, as was pointed out by Ms Watt, are off grid. Electricity when you are on a battery supply is not often suitable for heating, so a lot of them still use wood.

I hope that the government does look at what is going on here and comes up with some sort of sustainable solution, because it does appear that the current solution is not sustainable, and as Mr Bourman points out, people are going out and effectively we have got another black market set-up. I hope that there are not so many black markets in this state that we end up at a point where we have two guys sitting in prison, one telling his story about being in prison for selling a cherry vape and the other one for collecting firewood to keep warm. I hope we can get beyond that. I fully support Mr Bourman's motion here to look at better solutions that are sustainable and allow people to collect wood, because for those of us living in the city it is very easy to forget that many people really do depend on this for their everyday life, and winter is coming.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:29): I am pleased to rise to make a contribution on Mr Bourman's motion 287. I have been interested in listening to the debate so far. My reflection on the debate is that this is a supply and demand issue for those in need. As we heard from Mr Limbrick just then, my thoughts went to the basic right and dignity of keeping yourself warm in your own home – in your shelter – and also feeding yourself. For many Victorians – and overwhelmingly those Victorians are rural, remote and regional Victorians – a woodfired heater and a woodfired stove can still be the main source of their heating and cooking. Supply and demand – we can think about supply and demand in terms of other sources of energy and of electricity. If we believe the government, evil gas has got to be stamped out. We are not allowed to have gas in our homes anymore because of all the atrocious things it is, whereas we on this side understand that it can be used and continue to be used as a stable supply for peak electricity as we move to a low carbon economy. There is the importance of gas for food stocks and a whole range of other products as well, and there is supply and demand in terms of its importance in heating people's homes.

The first part of Mr Bourman's motion speaks about Supreme Court decisions to place injunctions on rural firewood collection. Well, it actually placed injunctions on VicForests coupes. There is a whole wealth of pain felt out in the industry about those Supreme Court injunctions. I will pick up one of Ms Watts's comments. She said it was not their fault; it was the fault of the legal system – the Supreme Court. The Andrews Labor government would not lock up coupes and keep people out. Well, I know that my colleague Danny O'Brien, during the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, quizzed the Premier at the time, the Honourable Daniel Andrews. Daniel Andrews said, 'Oh, there's legal advice to say that we cannot –

Harriet Shing interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Order!

Melina BATH: I think I have the right to be heard in silence. You can have your turn when you are ready.

The Premier refused to provide that legal advice to show the Victorian population and those people who the government shut down that there was legal advice to say that you could not close those loopholes. We saw recent events in federal Parliament, where the timber industry is going to continue on. But this government was hell-bent on closing it, and closing it six years earlier, and the pain is rife through regional Victoria – no more so than in places like Orbost, where 45 per cent of the population is directly related to the native timber industry.

Let me read to the house something that has come from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It says that a well-managed forest system used as a resource for its benefits, including timber and firewood and fibre, offers the best mitigation pathway for climate change. This is something that the government has ignored, it is something that the Greens ignore and it is something that we Nationals and the Liberals understand all too well.

Part of the issue here is around lack of supply, as I have said, and that huge demand. There are different ways that you can access your firewood. Elderly people or people who do not have equipment or are at a disadvantage cannot go out and collect firewood from state parks and forests. They cannot avail themselves of that community firewood. What they need to do is go to a community forestry operator, who has in the past accessed that firewood through salvage at the end of a coupe or indeed harvest or has accessed, for example, windrow timber, which we have seen in the Wombat State Forest – that was a whole mess in its entirety as well – or go to commercial firewood operators. They would purchase it at a reduced rate – because of course it is a low-grade timber – from VicForests contractors and then saw it up and supply people all around the region.

One of my constituents, a local lady by the name of Joan Shinton, from Gippsland, has made some comments to me about the overriding costs now of actually purchasing firewood. She said it is getting up to the point of \$400 for 1 metre to be delivered. Being on a very low budget and a very tight budget, she is going to have to make some decisions – she said in her comments to me – about whether she heats her home or whether she eats each week and pays the bills. Her other concern, and I think it is a very sincere and kind position to take, is if she then goes and seeks to purchase the lowest cost firewood, whether that is going to be sourced from illegal conduct or an illegal action.

That is a concern to all of us, because we do not want supply and demand to be pitched in such a way that there come rogue operators who enter our state parks and forests and take timber and take trees that are habitat trees or that do provide a habitat source or that are highly important. Clearly all trees or fallen wood can be habitat trees of some form, but you need to have a relative scale. In regard to Mr Bourman's point (c):

deadwood is the easiest wood to collect –

okay –

and is most likely to be a habitat tree for native animals ...

I think that is little bit loose in its commentary because indeed you can have brand new, virtually six-month-old timber that does not have holes and gnarls throughout and that actually would make excellent timber for firewood and may well not be a habitat tree, but I take his point. I think the point he was trying to make is that we do not want these illegal operators coming in and taking the easiest pickings and not only doing those illegal operations but indeed diminishing or putting stress on a habitat and native flora and fauna.

One of the things that I know my colleague the Shadow Minister for Agriculture Emma Kealy was very keen for us to have a discussion on in this place, and I thank Mr Bourman for including her comments or her additional pieces in this motion, was extending the current commercial firewood collection permits until an alternative system can be made. Again, it is supply and demand. We need

to ensure that the elderly and the people that do not have the operations to be able to go and collect firewood have access to it.

The other thing that I often hear in my electorate is the fact that the firewood season is quite limited and that although there are two seasons, people feel like the areas are diminishing or the access points are diminishing for those people that can actually go out and collect their own firewood. So I put that on record. I understand that point (2)(c) – ‘remove the domestic firewood collection seasonal restrictions’ – could be, again, until something better could be put in place.

I would finally like to take up the interjection of Ms Shing, who said, ‘Would you bring it back? Would you bring it back? Would you bring it back?’ Well, indeed my understanding is that VicForests is about to be shut down by the Allan government. It is an organisation that was serving and supporting the government’s forestry industry. That is going to get closed down. Nostradamus could probably tell you that. So whatever it will look like, it cannot look like what it has in the past. It cannot look like what it has in the past because there will not be a VicForests. But we will always stand by our rural and regional communities and the jobs that they create – *(Time expired)*

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (16:39): I am delighted to stand here today in support of Mr Bourman’s motion. Numerous times last year I brought up this very subject of wood collection, and my constituents in Northern Victoria Region are screaming out for this. I myself actually live in a soldier settler’s home, which is the type of house that you see covering the majority of the northern Victorian regional areas. These are good little homes, but I kid you not, having three split systems going to try to keep us warm is nothing in comparison to a wood fire. That definitely keeps us much warmer. We have been seeing a lot of power outs also recently, and coming into the winter season, having access to firewood would make it much better for my constituents to keep warm and cook with. I myself have gone through many blackouts and relied on my wood heater.

I have been lucky enough to have access to private properties where I can collect wood. The thing is, the majority of these trees have fallen. They are not hollow; there is nothing living in them. If anything, I see one or two huntsmans scurry out, and they make their way to the next standing tree. When it comes to native wildlife, I do believe that there is plenty of wood and habitat for them that people do not collect as firewood. Nobody wants a green tree. We are after the ones that are on the ground that have been there for, say, 12 to 18 months. So I am happy to support this motion, and I hope to see it successful in the future.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:41): I also rise today to speak on the motion which has been put before this house by my colleague Mr Bourman. I note the contributions of colleagues from across the chamber, from Ms Watt in particular; an interesting contribution from Ms Bath, which I think was a bit more about the native timber industry than it was actually about the matter which we are here to speak about today but was still nevertheless very interesting, as Ms Bath’s contributions always are; and indeed from my colleague from across the aisle Mrs Tyrrell as well. I appreciated your contribution too.

The motion that we have before us today by Mr Bourman firstly notes that the Supreme Court’s decision to place injunctions on rural firewood collection by licensed community foresters has, in his eyes, resulted in a surge in illegal firewood collection on public land. The collection of illegal firewood is in direct response, he claims, to the need for people to use fires for cooking and heating. Deadwood is apparently the easiest wood to collect and is most likely to be a habitat tree for native animals, amongst other things. I do acknowledge Mr Bourman for bringing this matter before us today. It does correctly bring attention to the fact that many households in Victoria do rely on firewood, especially in regional and rural Victoria. Some indeed depend on it for heating and cooking. I do note, and I will go into this in a little bit, that the government does have a specific program which allows Victorians to collect firewood for that very purpose already.

My own experiences on this matter are not quite as extensive as perhaps some others, but growing up in outer metropolitan exurban pockets of Melbourne, certainly I have strong childhood memories of going to bring the firewood in from the woodshed. It was the job that I absolutely hated the most.

Harriet Shing interjected.

Michael GALEA: Ms Shing, I will take up your interjection. One of the reasons I hated it the most was because I do not particularly like huntsman spiders and woodsheds tend to attract them. So there were lots of gloves and lots of tentative cautious picking up of the firewood as I put it into the wheelbarrow to take it back to the house – not my strongest endeavour, bringing firewood in. I even had a go at chopping firewood. It was quite fun. I was not particularly good at it back at the age of 14, but I gave it a go nonetheless and enjoyed it. But definitely, if I am looking back to my teenage years, by far the chore that I hated the most was bringing firewood in. The children across regional and rural Victoria and outer metropolitan Melbourne who still do that have my sympathies as well.

But there are some people who, for reasons of ambience or cooking or heating or other reasons, relish the chance to collect their own firewood, and this is a government that allows them to do that under the framework of that initiative. Victorians can currently collect domestic firewood at no cost and without a permit from specific FCAs as they are known, firewood collection areas, during the designated firewood collection seasons. Whilst domestic firewood is free to collect from state forests in Victoria, there is of course a cost in making it available to the community, and this means that domestic firewood does need to be managed responsibly. The government aims to carefully balance the importance of our environment and the opportunity for people to have access to firewood through this strategy. As firewood is of course an unpredictable and finite resource, demand in some cases will of course exceed supply. The firewood collected during the spring and autumn collection seasons generally needs at least eight to 12 months to cure and be dry for use. One thing I do know from my childhood is that putting a wet log onto the fire is about as effective as – there is probably a very good analogy that I cannot think of at the moment.

A member interjected.

Michael GALEA: Unless you want to smoke ham. As I am rightly advised by the Minister for Water in front of me, if you do want to smoke a good ham, you should have some wet firewood, but if you want a nice, hot, strong fire, dry firewood is the way to go.

So where domestic firewood supply is low, priority access can be limited to particular community members, such as residents in the immediate vicinity, traditional owners and others who are particularly dependent on firewood for heating purposes. One of the cruel ironies of collecting firewood as a teenager too is that you are never collecting it on a nice, sunny spring day. It is always the miserable, foggy day; you can barely see 2 metres in front of you. There is a reason that you need that fire; it is absolutely bloody cold outside. And that is why, again, for many reasons I may even return to in the rest of my contribution today it was my most hated job as a child.

Under the current program you can only collect trees or parts of trees that are already on the ground. That means that you are not allowed to damage trees to gather firewood, to cut them down with a saw or an axe or to break off branches or damage the tree. For ecological and safety reasons this includes collecting firewood from dead trees in such a manner, and to protect animal habitat and ecosystems, you cannot collect from hollow trees or if more than half of the tree is covered with moss or fungi. The role that these trees play in the forest of course makes these provisions, in particular, vital.

Last spring season there were over 250 sites open across the state for domestic firewood collection, an increase from the previous collection season. There are two domestic firewood collection seasons throughout the year. To clarify, those are the autumn season, which runs from 1 March, which is only a few weeks away from us now, until 30 June, and the spring season, which runs from 1 September to 30 November. Each person is allocated a quota of 2 cubic metres per day to a maximum of 16 cubic metres per household per financial year.

The rules for domestic firewood collection are contained in the Forests (Domestic Firewood) 2022 and the Crown Land (Reserves) (Domestic Firewood) Regulations 2022. Those firewood collection areas, FCAs, are selected and prepared by the firewood collection management framework; their locations and opening dates are then advertised to the broader Victorian community. Compliance with firewood collection rules is vital, because illegal collection can negatively affect forest health, wildlife habitat and general public safety. Serious penalties do apply if you break the law regarding firewood collection, including fines of up to \$8261 or up to one year's imprisonment. Several methods are used to ensure compliance with this and other important laws relating to state forests, including video surveillance cameras to monitor state forests and conservation regulators conducting regular patrols of threat areas.

As I say, this is a program that has been fully supported by this government, by the former Andrews and now Allan Labor government, and we are committed to ensuring safe access to domestic firewood without unduly compromising forest health and wildlife habitat. Since 2014 this Labor government has invested over \$582 million towards biodiversity. This is the most significant investment by a Victorian government in this space, ever.

Most people do of course comply with the collection limit of 2 cubic metres per person per day and that maximum, as I mentioned previously, of 16 cubic metres per financial year. Authorised officers regularly patrol parks, forests and reserves to promote compliance with these collection rules. The previous government removed the requirement for a permit to collect domestic firewood. Permits support continued monitoring to ensure community members stick to the relevant regional limit for how much domestic firewood someone can take. The firewood strategy refresh was completed in late 2018 to improve the management of domestic firewood collection. There are of course a number of concession programs and rebates in place ranging from \$51 to \$575 for people as required, such as the non-mains energy concession in that particular case.

There is more I could definitely talk about in terms of the Supreme Court's decision which Mr Bourman refers to in his motion, and I would love the chance to do so. However, I am aware that my time is coming to a close. I am also aware that we are graced again with Mrs McArthur in the chamber. I am sure she has more than one or two things to say about this issue, and I join my colleagues in my fervent anticipation of what we might soon be hearing – hold onto the edge of your seats, people. I will conclude my remarks by acknowledging Mr Bourman for bringing this motion to us today. I will conclude my remarks there.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:51): I apologise to Mr Galea that he gets me, not Mrs McArthur, but I rise to speak in support of Mr Bourman's motion on Victorian firewood collection. Currently, domestic firewood collection from public land is only permitted in designated areas between 1 March and 30 June or between 1 September and 30 November. During these periods, like they said, you can collect a maximum of 2 cubic metres of firewood per day per person or a maximum of 16 cubic metres of firewood per household per financial year. Fallen trees without hollows can be collected. Outside of these times there is no option. This means if a tree has fallen on the side of a road, this cannot be collected for firewood, and if it is, the person collecting that can be faced with hefty fines. It does not matter if the individual needs wood for fuel. It does not matter if the tree has fallen, is dangerous and needs to be removed.

Bev McArthur: And a fire hazard as well.

Renee HEATH: And a fire hazard. It does not matter if the individual is struggling financially and cannot afford to heat their home.

The government website states that authorised officers are educating the public about rules and penalising thieves – they use the word 'thieves'. Anyone caught breaking firewood collection rules can face on-the-spot fines of \$740 under the Forests Act 1958 or a maximum penalty of \$9246 or – wait for it – one year in jail if the matter is taken to court. It also states that last year the conservation

regulator laid 625 charges and issued 85 infringement notices. It is absolutely unbelievable. Also, cases which result in the Magistrates' Court can face convictions or fines and have chainsaws and trailers forfeited and destroyed. Imagine getting fined or going to jail for collecting firewood from fallen trees. This is a government overreach.

Over winter Victoria's firewood shortage will get worse. It will not matter if there are trees that have fallen, Victorians will be forced to source timber from interstate. That seems ridiculous to me. It also seems outrageous that rules like these are being implemented in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis created by the Labor government because of its out-of-control spending and because of its mismanaged projects. Labor is making life tougher for Victorians. While the government claims it is doing all it can to deal with this cost-of-living crisis and to provide relief, it is restricting the collection of firewood from the very people who are in need of that relief. It is almost as if the government has forgotten about the very people it exists to serve.

Everyone in this chamber will be aware that today marks 15 years since the Black Saturday bushfires. It is time to stop and reflect on how we can all work together towards fuel reduction. Fuel reduction is a crucial safety measure. One of the horrible dangers during the Black Saturday bushfires was that roads became a deathtrap because of the amount of fuel on the roadsides. Allowing people to use fallen trees near roadsides as firewood can be a measure that protects against and during bushfires, and it benefits the individual at no cost at all to the government. The Liberals and the Nationals have repeatedly warned the state Labor government of the dire consequences that regional communities will suffer if firewood shortages are not addressed. Yet instead of heeding our advice, the government stood by last month when VicForests brought forward the end of the forestry operations. Many Victorian families in regional Victoria rely on firewood for heat and cooking, especially amid a worsening cost-of-living crisis. This cheap alternative keeps families warm, but if shortages are not addressed, I worry we will risk lives this winter.

These restrictions have led to illegal harvesting of firewood from parks and reserves and have also forced regional Victorians to pay for costly firewood from interstate. If anything, this debacle paints a clear picture of Labor's inability to comprehend the consequences faced when the advice of activists is followed at the cost of regional Victorians. Policies based on ideology rather than practicality risk people's lives, and the government should be ashamed of its treatment of people in regional communities. I am pleased to support this motion and call for the government to explore solutions to address this shortage, especially with the cold months ahead of us.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:57): I move:

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

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

Business of the house

Notices of motion and orders of the day

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:57): I move:

That all remaining notices of motion and orders of the day, general business, be postponed until the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (16:57): I rise to make a statement on the final report of the Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements, which

was tabled in this place on 31 August last year. Last week the government announced its response to the 2023 report of the select committee into duck hunting here in Victoria, and that response is to allow the recreational hunting of native birds to continue in Victoria. As chair of the select committee, many have reached out seeking my response to the decision of the government, and I thought this contribution was the best way to put my response on the public record.

I am disappointed by the government's decision. As the committee's final report recommended, I believe that native duck hunting should end. In saying that, I did come to the 2023 inquiry and the committee with no fixed view. On the committee I was persuaded by the environmental science that the long-term trends show native bird populations are in decline despite the occasional bumper year, and two bird species that were once routinely hunted are now threatened species and protected. I interrogated the regulatory framework and found the compliance and enforcement system severely wanting. The Game Management Authority has a chequered past as an effective regulator. Things have improved, but there is a long way to go.

The GMA's focus is often on keeping public order between hunters and animal welfare activists rather than on checking compliance with hunting regulations. In 2022 the committee was told that only 11 per cent of hunters had a licence check from the GMA and only 9 per cent of bags were examined. I came to the view that by its nature and under the way that wildlife game regulations operate, bird hunting is exclusionary – the rules operate to exclude non-hunters from vast tracts of public lands during hunting season in a way that, for example, fishing or boating simply do not. But these are my views, and others have different views. Lots of Victorians, the committee inquiry showed us, are very passionate about this issue. Respectful debate, even with disagreement, is healthy for our democracy.

In making the announcement of the government's response last week, Minister Dimopoulos said that the government had accepted that Victorians should be able to hunt native birds. The government response also acknowledged that the current regulatory and enforcement rules were not good enough. The government accepted seven of the eight recommendations made by the committee to improve hunter behaviour and strengthen compliance and enforcement, and beyond the recommendations the report of the committee made a series of findings about ways to improve the current regulatory framework, including by introducing new hunter proficiency tests so that hunters actually have to demonstrate that they know how to shoot and by making regular retesting of the waterfowl identification test so that hunters know what birds they are allowed to shoot. These will be new requirements for hunters, and I welcome these moves. They are necessary. Whether they are sufficient is the next test for the hunting community, because that is where the future of this issue now rests – in the hands of game hunters, their associations and the Game Management Authority. Their behaviour and their actions will now demonstrate whether they are worthy of the faith that the government has shown in them.

The Sporting Shooters' Association told the inquiry that no threatened bird species should be mistakenly shot by hunters – not one – and Field and Game Australia gave similar evidence. On how to improve hunter compliance with the rules Gary Howard, the caretaker of Field and Game's private wetland in Sale, said:

Peer pressure is probably the biggest factor that can be brought to bear on hunters that are doing the wrong thing ...

These are now the thresholds for acceptable hunter behaviour. These are the standards that must be met. The committee's report said that the 2023 season was arguably the most scrutinised on record, and yet we found that infractions against hunting regulations still occurred. The eyes of many will be on hunters in 2024 and beyond.

Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements*Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements*

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:02): I also wish to speak on the select committee inquiry into native bird hunting. It is great that the Victorian Labor Party and this Allan government have been dragged kicking and screaming into abandoning their ridiculous proposed ban on duck hunting. We know where this inquiry came from. We know that it was a stitch-up from the get-go. Nobody seriously believes that this inquiry would have ever found anything other than this predetermined outcome that those pushing for a ban were seeking to justify. These activists believe that hunters are nothing more than a destructive force on nature, ignoring their crucial role in conservation seen in places like Heart Morass and Lake Connewarre.

Duck hunting is so much more than a hobby or a pastime. It is a cherished cultural tradition that has flourished in Victoria for generations from the First Australians to present-day hunters. For many Victorians this practice is how they experience and deepen their connection to the land, their friends and families, undeniably improving mental health outcomes. Many families have been hunting as a tradition for generations.

Together with Liberal and National MPs, our open letter against a ban received over 750 signatures that were sent directly to Premier Jacinta Allan. I was on the committee and co-authored a dissenting report and hosted a duck-hunting forum in Craigieburn, where over 400 hunters were present to make their voices heard. I should also thank my colleagues that were involved: Melina Bath, who did a great job drafting our dissenting report for the inquiry; Bev McArthur for her work on the dissenting report and on the inquiry; and also Wendy Lovell, Emma Kealy and Annabelle Cleeland for attending and contributing to my forum. I would also like to thank Field and Game Australia, including CEO Lucas Cooke, and Field and Game Australia members for their advocacy, also the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia Victorian branch. I would also like to thank the Working Gundog Association, a great dog club in the northern suburbs.

It was great to visit Riddells Creek with my family for a demonstration of the dog training they do. I know my kids certainly enjoyed playing with the pups. Hunters should never forget their local Labor MPs at the ballot box in 2026 that were silent on duck hunting. Some, like the member for Albert Park, were even posting Facebook videos celebrating the inquiry report and promising a ban. The member for Greenvale in my electorate was silent on the ban. Countless duck hunters from my electorate came to the forum and told me they had never heard back regarding their inquiries on duck hunting. The member for Kalkallo in my electorate, who has over 1000 duck hunters in her electorate, was silent on the ban. The member for Yan Yean, who has over 2600 duck hunters in her electorate, far exceeding her margin in that seat, was also silent on the ban. We will continue to fight for Victorian duck hunters to ensure that we have a hunting season well beyond 2024. We will also continue fighting to support the rights of Victorians to enjoy the great outdoors, be that hunting, four-wheel driving, fishing or camping. Labor MPs have shown they are not to be trusted on these matters. Labor MPs have wanted to ban duck hunting for a long time, and I feel that the union pressure and especially the pressure I and my colleagues, including Melina Bath, put on Labor MPs in their seats got too much for the government to stay the course and proceed with their plan for a ban.

And how humbling for members like Mr Batchelor and Mr Galea, who actually criticised me in this place for hosting a duck hunting forum and for taking up the plight of hunters, that their Premier Jacinta Allan – I know she was not Mr Galea's choice – had to roll them on the issue, so another loss for Ms Blandthorn and Mr Galea. Let me make this clear – the Labor Party always intended on banning duck hunting, and they will follow through if given the opportunity. My message to the Labor Party is the opposition will not allow you to ban duck hunting. It is a cherished family tradition and a good and decent pastime for hardworking Victorians. If Labor and their activist mates had their way, there would be no duck hunting, perhaps no hunting at all, and our state and national parks would be locked away rather than available for the benefit and enjoyment of all Victorians.

Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements*Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements*

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (17:07): I want to make a statement on the Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements. The line over the past week or so has been that the government has ignored its own report. Nonsense. In the nine years that I have been in this place I do not think I have seen the government pay more attention to a report than they have to this one. You would not know it if you listened to the line being peddled by the animal rights lobby, but it is true. There are eight recommendations in that report; the government accepted seven of them. There are four separate reports all up; the government has given proper consideration to all of them. The irony is that the people pushing the line that the government has ignored its own report are the very people who wanted the government to ignore its own report except for a single sentence. They wanted the government to ignore most of the recommendations. They wanted the government to ignore the reports written by most of the committee members. They are not upset because the government ignored its own report; they are upset because the government did not ignore its own report.

Duck hunting had been dying a death of a thousand cuts for decades now as successive governments kicked the can of real policy reform further and further down the road. The government's response to this report ends that uncertainty and provides a clear pathway forward. I am not sure what the Minister for Planning and the former Minister for Planning had in mind when they cooked this inquiry up, but this is what it has delivered. The two of them have done the hunters of Victoria a great service.

A couple of things about the media coverage over the past week have been particularly troubling. The first is the appalling manipulation of a member of this house by a media outlet. As the father of a young girl I stand in support of her and in condemnation of that crap. The second is the narrative that the animal rights movement has pushed about the Premier. The great thing about living in 2024 is we do not care what the Premier's gender is anymore. I am old enough to remember when Joan Kirner became Premier in 1990. Back then, the fact that she was a female premier was remarkable. When our current Premier came to the leadership late last year the focus was on her ability, not her gender. That is how it should be. That is what I want my young daughter to see when she grows up. Why elements of the animal rights movement thought it was appropriate to accuse the Premier of taking the position she has on duck hunting because of her husband is beyond me. This woman, who has served in the Parliament for a quarter of a century, much of that in senior ministries, is nothing more than a Stepford wife according to these troglodytes. Ironically, these are the same people that argue that duck hunting would be progressive.

Duck hunting in Victoria is safe, humane and sustainable. The changes outlined by the government last week will ensure that it continues to meet and exceed community expectations. I want to finish by thanking all my fellow members of the select committee. The result belongs to all of us.

Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements*Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements*

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:10): I rise to speak on the report of the Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements. Last week the government issued its response to our report. It supported seven of our eight recommendations. It did, however, reject the first recommendation of the report, which called for the abolition of the annual recreational bird hunting season on both private and public lands from this year onwards.

My position on this report is well known both from the extracts of its proceedings and from my statements in this place. I stand by the report today just as much as I did on the day that it was tabled. However, I do not intend to use my contribution today to aerate my self-evident disappointment. The recommendations which have been accepted by government will still provide a meaningful pathway to improving the situation, even if not to the extent that I would have hoped. Measures such as banning

the use of lead shot, which is currently still permitted when shooting quails; protections for cultural heritage; and improved testing regimes, such as knowledge and proficiency testing, will all play their role. The latter in particular will be critical if we are to meaningfully reduce wounding rates, which our report found to be anywhere between 6 and 40 per cent.

A further matter the report identified as being critically important in the event that native bird hunting continued is that public land used for such purposes be specifically declared each season rather than the current scenario of excluding land as required. This, together with the provision of reliable and publicly available map data on where hunting occurs, would strengthen accountability and provide for more effective compliance management by the Game Management Authority and Victoria Police. Proponents of native bird hunting maintained to our inquiry that wounding rates can be meaningfully reduced and compliance improved. It is now up to them to prove it.

As much as I would have preferred a different outcome to this report, I entirely respect the government's right to make this decision. Parliamentary committees play an invaluable role in our democratic process, but they are not executive decision-makers and nor should they be. I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge the considerable work put in to this report by our chair Mr Batchelor. Mr Batchelor led what was a truly investigative committee which deeply and genuinely explored the issue. He made great efforts to ensure all voices were heard at the table and that all committee members were given an equal chance to prosecute their arguments.

Our committee was initiated following a successful motion by the government on 9 March last year. It was read in by Minister Blandthorn, and I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge her passion and her unwavering dedication to this issue. I recall at the time members opposite in their contributions lambasted the inquiry, calling it a foregone conclusion. Evidently it was not. The work of our inquiry is now done, and our report has been responded to. I look forward to seeing the implementation of the seven recommendations which have been supported by the government and the outcomes that they will deliver. I will personally continue to advocate for our state's native birds and for an end to their recreational slaughter.

Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Inquiry into the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:14): I rise to speak on the report from the Economy and Infrastructure Committee inquiry into the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023. I particularly want to talk to the dissenting report to which I was happily a signatory along with my colleagues Mr Davis and Mr Mulholland and participating members Dr Heath and Mrs Broad. In March 2023 an unnamed Labor government spokeswoman stated:

The WorkCover scheme is fundamentally broken ...

This extraordinary admission followed a long period of poor performance by the WorkCover scheme, two critical Ombudsman inquiry reports and little action from the Victorian Labor government to address it. For nearly six years Victoria's WorkCover scheme has seen a decline in performance. The quantity of claims has nearly doubled and mental injury claims have skyrocketed.

A 2020 report into the system performed by Finity Consulting found the cost of the scheme had spiralled out of control, yet despite the clear evidence that WorkCover required significant reform the Labor government failed to act. Ahead of the 2022 state election the Labor government chose not to publish the Finity report or act on its findings and instead spent \$1.3 billion of taxpayers funds to prop up the scheme. Labor only acted when WorkCover had reached crisis point, forcing employers to accept a 42 per cent increase in their premiums in July 2023 and in November 2023 admitting the WorkCover scheme was in need of urgent reform when it introduced the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023. There

is no defensible reason, however, why the Labor government attempted to introduce the bill into Parliament without adequately or fully consulting with the Victorian public or with stakeholders and without publishing any actuarial advice or modelling supporting the proposed changes.

Is the government a responsible employer? Clearly not, because while the Victorian public service makes up approximately 10 per cent of the state's labour force, the 2021–22 WorkSafe annual report indicated that more than 38 per cent of all mental injury claims under the WorkCover scheme are made by public servants. No data on the scale of mental injury claims by the public sector was provided by WorkSafe in their 2022–23 annual report – that is absolutely shameful – although the report included the admission that mental injuries continue to be a challenge and a focus for WorkSafe, including in this sector. Evidence provided to the committee indicated that four public sector departments alone account for 25 per cent of all mental health injury claims in Victoria. Witnesses to the inquiry revealed teachers and police officers have the highest proportion of mental health injury claims. We heard from many people, but Ms Stracke from the Victorian Trades Hall Council commented:

I mean, we know most stress claims come – the worst offender is the public sector ...

That is from one of your own union bosses. Ms Wyatt from Return to Work Matters said:

The mental health claims are predominately coming from the public sector, so obviously getting in and working with the public sector departments that are the biggest areas of mental health injuries would be the place to start ...

The private sector is doing its job in providing a safe workplace for its employees, but the public sector, the government, is clearly not. Mental injury claims stemming from the public sector are likely to continue to present a challenge. One of the key recommendations that the dissenting report made was for the Labor government to commission an audit of the performance of the Victorian public sector's workplace prevention and early intervention programs within the next 12 months. This report showed the government is a bad employer.

Adjournment

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (17:19): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Small business support

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (17:19): (672) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Small Business, and it relates to support provided to the sector. I draw the minister's attention to a release that came out today from the Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance, which is a collection of regional chambers of commerce from across the state. They include places like Ballarat, Beaufort, Wodonga, Ballan, Shepparton, Geelong, Bendigo, Bannockburn and Apollo Bay – quite a number of different chambers – and they are calling on the state government for greater support. Let me quote from their release today. They say the Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance is again calling for support from the Victorian government as the situation across the state is worsening.

Now faced with worsening business conditions, the VRCA needs the Victorian Government to once again throw support directly behind regional businesses and the Chambers.

...

Further to this, the VRCA is also calling on the Victorian Government to announce some emergency small business support –

programs, because chambers are distraught, and they are taking calls from small businesses daily. I also had an email about half an hour ago from a local constituent of mine who is involved in the chamber and is a small business owner. He said:

I echo the commentary released in this statement –

today –

... as a Victorian constituent and small business owner, the situation without urgent government support is extremely dire ...

He went on to say:

We ... call to the Allan government today to offer some kind of emergency funding ...

It could be interest-free loans – some sort of support. Without that injection it is going to be very, very difficult to the point where they might even lose their livelihood and their business and their life savings, which is in 2024 unbelievable. He said:

This is a crisis similar to that of COVID19 and regional Victoria is in the midst of the most critical of positions. We implore the government to act immediately and save our industry, our businesses, our livelihoods and our families from ruin.

We always hear in this chamber that the government is pro small business. Well, hearing the feedback from the industry and locals, that is certainly not the case. I implore the minister, and the action that I seek is to make sure that she meets with the local chambers and small businesses to ensure that action is taken so that small businesses are not going to go under.

Medicinal cannabis

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:22): (673) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, Minister Thomas. I have been contacted by multiple people who have experienced being denied access to their prescribed medicinal cannabis administered via dry herb vape while being treated in Victorian hospitals. In one such case upon admission to hospital a person's prescribed medicine was confiscated by hospital staff, and the patient was unable to access it at any point during their stay. This was despite the hospital in question having a nearby smoking area and the patient offering to only take their medication in that area. For those who require inpatient services and who for a number of reasons cannot take their prescribed medicinal cannabis via another method, blanket bans such as these are damaging. They deny patients access to prescribed medicine and often force those already going through stressful medical treatment to use harmful and addictive opioids.

In Victoria there are no guidelines for hospitals to ensure medicinal cannabis patients who administer their prescription via vape can access their medication. I would also note that these vapes are TGA-approved administration devices. Instead there is the suggestion that a prescribing doctor should negotiate an access plan with the hospital, but blanket bans continue to be a barrier. In New South Wales and Queensland there are clear guidelines for admitting medicinal cannabis patients to hospital. These ensure adequate treatment that deals with the patient's wishes and illness while minimising risks. These guidelines cover a broad range of subjects, including how a patient's medicinal cannabis should be stored while they are at hospital.

We know that Australia's medicinal cannabis market is growing, and it is growing fast. Without proper guidelines in place for patients going through the hospital system, we risk short-changing patients on the benefits of their prescribed medicine and forcing them to use harmful alternatives such as opioids. The action I seek is that the minister commit to ensuring no hospital denies access to a patient's prescribed medicinal cannabis administered via vape. I seek that the minister do this through developing a set of guidelines for hospitals interacting with medicinal cannabis patients.

Greenvale pedestrian safety

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:24): (674) My adjournment tonight is seeking the action of the Minister for Public and Active Transport. The action I seek is for the minister to put forward plans to commence construction of foot paving in vital locations to make Greenvale, in my electorate, safer. Greenvale, in Melbourne's north, is popular amongst young families and has a growing population, so the need for safe new paths is vital. The Greenvale shopping centre is becoming, if it is not already, the central hub for all of Greenvale. It is the location of various stores,

the home of two main bus routes through the suburb and the host to various school service lines. That means the Greenvale shopping centre is a hotspot for our children.

Aitken College parents have expressed to me their concerns that their children coming from the south of the college are simply not able to ride or walk to school. These children will be subject to missing out on the vast benefits of active transport. As a result, buses are frequently overcrowded, travelling to and from the college, due to a restricted number of public transport options for many students. What my constituency and community ask for is safer road access coming from Greenvale shopping centre, the far side of the road, and then a connection of the path over the current roundabout to the existing paving in the newly opened estate. This would allow for a route to open for students to make their way safely from the south of the college to the school's Providence estate gate, where bike racks and a safe space are located.

Additionally, at the intersection of Greenvale Drive and Mickleham Road you are able to cross the road at a set of traffic lights to a non-existent footpath on your left. There is a need for a path from Greenvale shopping centre to Bonds Lane on the far side of the road. This path would provide safe access to local child care, the Villa Verde gardens and the Greenvale Football Club, as well as the new estate, which is now situated on Bonds Lane. These areas are prominent for many families and members of the community, hence why we need to make these areas safe.

Thirdly, at the intersection of Barrymore and Mickleham roads there is a need for a path on the far side of the road to allow safe pedestrian access to the Mickleham Road entrance of Woodlands historical parkland. The Woodlands historical parkland is host to stunning views and exceptional bike and walking tracks but is not currently safely accessible for residents via foot or bike. I often see children struggling to queue up on the Mickleham Road nature strip, waiting for a break in traffic to cross. It is simply unacceptable for our children to have to cross close to cars travelling in excess of 80 kilometres an hour. So I ask: what action will the minister take to ensure various places in Greenvale are safely accessible for our children and our wider community?

Treaty

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (17:27): (675) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, and my ask is that the Victorian government ensure treaty negotiations continue to be undertaken to provide maximum self-determination for First Nations people in Victoria. I ask this in light of a scathing report delivered by the Productivity Commission today into the national agreement on Closing the Gap, which found that governments have failed to improve outcomes for First Nations people and that this is due to an unwillingness to give control to First Nations people over their own affairs. The commissioners were unambiguous in their recommendation that in order to see real change in outcomes for First Nations people there needs to be real self-determination. This will require a paradigm shift towards true sharing of power, true joint decision-making and the transfer of control and resources to the Aboriginal community controlled sector.

It is really important to note that Victoria is the first state to embark on a path towards treaty with First Peoples. I commend this government for this work, something that the Greens have fully supported. For our state, treaty presents a critical juncture in the path towards self-determination for Victoria's First Peoples. Local-level treaties will be a powerful tool for communities to negotiate what they need to close the gap. The foundation blocks for treaty are now in place due to years of groundwork done by First Nations communities, and that is why this process is so critical in addressing the very issues the Productivity Commission's report has identified, particularly in the form of the First Peoples' Assembly and the Treaty Authority that have been established as part of this process.

Yet despite it being glaringly obvious that true justice, equality and bridging of the gap will only be achieved by listening to First Peoples, sharing power and letting go of the power that has been used to oppress people, the Liberals and Nationals in this state have announced they are walking away from treaty. This act needs to be seen for what it is – a shallow and desperate attempt to court divisiveness

and create a platform where they can fan a culture of grievance. They are trying to pit them against us, a tactic used by right-wing populists, and we have seen what that leads to before.

Their federal colleagues and some of their Victorian colleagues, might I add too, have form on this. From denying the trauma of colonisation to scapegoating people seeking asylum and refuge who are escaping from war to confecting gang wars and crime crises that target and stereotype people of colour, they have been the architects of racist division in this country for years, and they are now so desperate they are grasping it once again because they have no other agenda. We will not stand by and let them rip up the heart and generosity of millions of Victorians who have backed a treaty, time and time again. The only thing they will succeed in ripping up is themselves.

Ballarto–Potts roads, Skye

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:30): (676) My adjournment is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action I seek is for the minister to revisit the planned upgrade works along Ballarto Road in Skye with me to ensure the local CFA-requested controlled intersection at Potts Road and Ballarto Road is fixed quickly so that there is a safer mode of exit for all vehicles and less lengthy time delays, particularly for CFA emergency vehicles. The intersection along Potts Road, with the CFA fire station situated on its south-western corner, currently relies on an outdated and dangerous ‘Stop’ and ‘Give way’ sign system and has been overlooked in the current planned upgrade project. The intersection on the south-west corner of Ballarto Road currently has outdated, as I said, ‘Stop’ and ‘Give way’ signs. This system poses safety concerns, particularly for parents of schoolchildren who frequent the intersection for daily drop-offs and pick-ups at Skye Primary School. There is also a nearby school called Flinders college. There are also heavy haulage vehicles heading into the Quarry Road site in Langwarrin which use this intersection.

The Australian federal government co-funded a \$36.5 million project together with the Victorian government. The federal government was going to provide \$30 million; the state government was going to put in \$6.5 million, but of course now we have Labor at both ends, in federal and state government. The project on Ballarto Road between Seaford and Skye has been described as:

... an important east–west link from Frankston–Dandenong Road to Western Port Highway, with approximately 18,000 vehicles using this busy road every day.

Why then has this most important intersection been overlooked? According to the Skye CFA, under the existing traffic management system even emergency vehicles with lights and sirens at code 1 experience delays at this intersection. ‘Our brigade’, they say, ‘has encountered numerous new issues over the years,’ emphasising the urgency of upgrading this intersection to guarantee the safety of not only our first responders but the community they serve.

The Skye CFA has said that its primary concern is the missed opportunity to transform the Potts Road and Ballarto Road intersection into a controlled intersection, a change that would not only enhance safety for the community but also ensure efficient response times when responding to emergencies for our volunteer firefighters stationed at Skye CFA. I look forward to the response from the minister and also visiting this CFA with the minister – and the intersection which I have now named.

Grey-headed flying fox sanctuary

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (17:33): (677) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I seek is for him to meet with bat rescuers in my electorate. As it does all native animals, this government also hates bats, but over the break I was fortunate enough to spend some time with the extraordinary flying foxes in care at Faraday church wildlife sanctuary. Their carer Sam explained that once Chitty, Bang Bang, Patsy and Eddie are released, they will go on to strengthen the colonies of what is Australia’s only nocturnal long-distance pollinator. In fact, bats are capable of dispersing seeds over 60 kilometres in a single night. This hard work creates brand new forests of the very fruit that they eat, which can be over 50 species of native trees and vines. As flying foxes bury their heads in flowering plants in search of nectar, pollen gets caught in their fur and is spread over

long distances, fertilising countless plants and trees. Entire ecosystems rely on the survival of the inquisitive sky puppy, and yet we have destroyed their native habitat, decimating eucalypts, their main food source. Without proper nutrition, female bats cannot lactate. As a result, there are unprecedented numbers of juvenile flying foxes in Victoria and only a handful of vaccinated and registered carers who can help them, and it is not the only issue facing our bats.

Grey-headed flying foxes have been listed as a threatened species for over two decades in Victoria, and as they continue to starve, they are moving into urban areas in search of fruit. Despite the Animal Justice Party strengthening laws to abolish dangerous backyard fruit netting, rescuers are reporting a massive spike in entanglements. A recent call-out found rescuers attending to 100 adult entanglements at a single property. These netting injuries are as horrific as they are avoidable. Through lack of education and enforcement wildlife rescuers are forced to submit individual cases to Crime Stoppers with unclear outcomes. They are single-handedly bearing the expense of this illegal netting still being used. And with more rescues come more releases.

All 400 of the hand-reared pups currently in care must undertake a period of soft release for successful integration into the wild. Currently the situation for soft release in Victoria is limited because it must occur at an existing and established flying fox camp. The fernery at Rosalind Park in Bendigo has been identified by rescuers as a potential new site for soft release as it is generally closed to the public. With support from the government, it could provide an alternative aviary environment to help manage the overflow of pups being released back to the wild from now until May. Few animals are as misunderstood as bats, but their importance cannot be overstated, and I hope the minister will meet with the wonderful volunteers who are dedicated to their plight.

Illicit tobacco

Gaëlle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (17:36): (678) My question is for the Minister for Police following a major fire in a tobacco shop in Bendigo last week. The action I seek is that the minister introduce legislation to effectively regulate and eliminate illicit tobacco and provide increased resources for Victoria Police to assist in addressing tobacco-related crime in Victoria. This fire came on the back of a series of highly suspicious fires across Melbourne. The Bendigo incident sparked fears that crime and violence related to tobacco have now reached central Victoria. I understand that a man has been charged over the fire and there is a formal legal process to be gone through. However, regardless of the background, the attack was very dangerous and distressing for the community. It is estimated that the Bendigo fire caused up to \$4 million in damage. Surrounding businesses have been badly affected. Nearby landlords and business operators have been left to pick up the pieces. Some will struggle to get back on their feet even though they are the innocent victims in all of this.

Victoria is lagging behind the other states when it comes to regulating the sale of tobacco. Currently traders do not require a licence to operate and sell tobacco in Victoria, unlike alcohol, where a liquor licence is mandatory. This loophole is seeing criminal activity soar. In Bendigo more generally crime has increased by nearly 10 per cent in the last year. There are currently more than 800 vacancies in Victoria Police and 43 stations have reduced their opening hours, while these attacks continue. The action I seek is for the minister to commit to increasing police resources to help address these ongoing and increasingly distressing criminal issues in Victoria.

The PRESIDENT: That last action is fine, Mrs Broad. I was wondering: at the start, did you ask for the introduction of legislation?

Gaëlle Broad: Yes.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, so we will just do the last action.

Cost of living

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:38): (679) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs, and the action that I seek is for the Labor government to take tangible

action to ensure that Victorians can afford basic groceries. You might not have heard it in this place, but you will not believe this. The internet is abuzz over the fact that more Coles supermarkets here in Victoria are literally locking their honey in security boxes. Ten-dollar honey can be found on the shelves with an absurd level of security. We first saw this happen about a year ago, with a Coles spokesperson at the time claiming it was because too many people were taking a freebie. But now it is being seen in more and more stores. They need to protect that \$10 honey after all.

This follows a trend from our Coles and Woolworths, who have been implementing some extreme surveillance tactics while boasting billions – or buzz-illions – in profit. I have said it before, but the best way to get people to bee-hive themselves and not have sticky fingers is to make basic groceries affordable. But instead, Coles has opted for plan B: to treat shoppers like criminals for setting foot inside their stores. Meanwhile the people of Victoria are going hungry due to price gouging from the supermarket duopoly of Coles and Woolies. The Labor government appears bewitched by the duopoly, refusing to step in and regulate them. We as pollen-ticians have the ability to bring the stories of people struggling to this Parliament, but you as the government have the ability to act.

Despite my delightful puns, this is not actually about honey but rather the fact that Victorians are in a cost-of-living crisis. Every day we see more and more people accessing food relief services for the first time and cutting back on essential services such as health care. Whilst price gouging runs rampant, Victorians are struggling to afford basic groceries. It is time for this Labor government to say ‘New year, new bee’ and to stand up to Coles and Woolies.

The PRESIDENT: So the action was to stand up to Coles and Woolies?

Aiv Puglielli: It was to take action to ensure Victorians can afford basic groceries.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:41): (680) My adjournment tonight is for the Minister for Creative Industries, and it concerns the ABC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a very important national cultural institution. A billion dollars or more is spent on the ABC every year. It is incredibly important in supporting a range of arts and cultural activities across the country, traditionally supporting television production and associated matters, so what money is spent on it and where it is spent is actually important to Victoria. We have more than a billion dollars of federal money, and specifically what I want the minister to do is to speak to his federal colleague and to advocate for Victoria.

We know that more than 50 per cent of staff in the ABC are in New South Wales, principally in Sydney. But when you look at the ABC board there are nine members on the ABC board; none of them, not one, is from Victoria or Melbourne. Twenty-five per cent of our population is here, 25 per cent of the economy is in Victoria and a huge percentage of the arts and creative industries are in Victoria, and spending in that area underpins these industries. So money is being ripped out of Victoria in taxes, and now we have a body that is not returning it in any equal or fair way that both economically and culturally reflects our state.

There are nine members on the board; six of them are based in Sydney, one is based in Canberra, one is based in Perth and one is based in Queensland. So there are seven of them – 78 per cent – in a Sydney–Canberra axis. It is no wonder that the ABC feels like the Sydney broadcasting corporation, and it is no wonder that it feels so strongly like a body that is reflecting the culture of Sydney and New South Wales and Canberra and not the culture of Victoria. We saw that *Insiders* has moved to Canberra. That is just typical of what you see when you have got a body that has got seven out of nine members from New South Wales and Canberra – that is 78 per cent of the board. The weight, the pressure and the understanding from the board – and it flows down from there – is so strong.

What I want the Minister for Creative Industries to do is to make contact with the federal minister and to advocate for Victorian arts and creative industries, to make the point that the ABC is an important

cultural institution. A billion dollars worth of funding – we want our share. We want equal share in terms of the staffing, and we want the board fixed. The next member of that board should be a Victorian, and the one after that and the one after that too.

Health and wellbeing data

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:44): (681) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Health. It is exactly one year since I raised the issue of a biennial report on the public health of Victorians being absent from publication. As I stated at the time:

Section 21(c) of the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 establishes a requirement for the chief health officer:
to publish on a biennial basis and make available in an accessible manner to members of the public a comprehensive report on public health and wellbeing in Victoria ...

In response to my previous adjournment exactly one year ago the Minister for Health responded that a report was being developed and would be published as required under the act. Perhaps it got lost when Mr Sutton left his role. But while there were no doubt more important things to worry about during the pandemic, surely it does not take a year for the highest paid health bureaucrats in the state to write a report detailing a snapshot of the health of Victorians. The previous CHO did not seem to be able to fulfil this statutory requirement, but since July last year we have had a new CHO.

Times are tough, and I understand that the government is cutting back on lavish spending, so perhaps this report is not actually a good use of taxpayer money. Therefore I will amend my previous request and ask the Minister for Health to either ensure this report is published or amend the Public Health and Wellbeing Act to remove this statutory requirement.

The PRESIDENT: There have been a couple of these. The first action? That is all right.

Tasty Plate

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:46): (682) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Disability and concerns the shock closure of Tasty Plate in Warrnambool, an organisation which worked with people with disabilities, giving them a real opportunity to participate in the workforce, to develop skills and to provide much-loved catering services for their customers. Brophy Family and Youth Services took over the running of Tasty Plate from the original founders, and I am sorry to say I have heard considerable criticism in recent weeks of the job that they did. Firstly, this includes the shock manner of the closure and the sudden termination of 19 employees and 14 NDIS participants. Surely this could have been handled better. Secondly, the arguments given: COVID was referenced, but the major reason given was that there were insufficient participants. Businesses elsewhere have recovered from COVID, especially those with outside sources of funding like the NDIS, and organisations offering similar community services thrive elsewhere in our state. So in my view questions need to be asked of the management and board of Brophy. I have heard many doubts about the lack of participants too, including from families whose children were told they were unsuitable for the program despite its entire purpose being to help those in that situation.

A newspaper report quotes one potential employee with long experience in hospitality and customer-facing business saying:

They told me they had too many staff members and they told me they really only take school leavers.

Unsurprisingly and with commendable understatement he said of recent news:

I was a bit annoyed when I heard they're closing because they don't have enough participants.

I was interested to note that in the same newspaper article a Labor colleague of mine representing Western Victoria Region declined to comment on Tasty Plate's closure and the impact it has had on the cafe, at the TAFE, in the new library, at Tasty Plate on Fairy Street and for the Warrnambool May race meeting catering contract.

It is clear that Brophy Family and Youth Services took over and ran a successful organisation which provided important services to the local community and at the same time offered great opportunities to local NDIS participants. The action I seek from the minister, however, is to ask: what lessons will be drawn from the failure of this service, which has enormous local and individual impact? Will there be a review of the board's and management's decisions, and will she encourage alternative provision in this space in Warrnambool?

Eating disorders

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:49): (683) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Mental Health, but it relates to the mental health unit at the Monash Children's Hospital. The action I am seeking is for the minister to speak with her colleague the Minister for Health in sorting out this issue. The reason I raise it in mental health is because it relates to young people with eating disorders. As we know, this is a very severe disease that affects far too many young people, and there needs to be a lot of attention put on this. It has been widely reported that since the pandemic, when Victorians endured extended lockdowns, eating disorders in young people have skyrocketed. People have told me that within our hospital system, and certainly parents are raising it with me, yet the government funding has not kept pace with the huge increase in demand for these specialised treatment services that these young people actually need.

There are parents who are desperately seeking help. Vanessa's daughter is 14 years old, she has been admitted to hospital around 15 times in the last two years for a severe eating disorder and she also has very complex mental health issues. Vanessa of course is deeply concerned that the current model of care at Monash Children's Hospital is not addressing both the physical and the mental health aspects of the illness, which is leading to poorer outcomes, more hospital admissions and ongoing distress for patients and families. It is alarming that 40 per cent of young patients are readmitted after discharge. Vanessa and other parents in this situation are asking for promised changes to the system, such as longer stays in hospital to allow an acute episode to stabilise and medications to take effect as well as outpatient services in the community for those families with children that are affected by eating disorders to be supported in their homes so that they do not have these repeat presentations at our emergency departments.

While the government continues to delay the release of its eating disorders strategy, which was due last year, children with serious health issues are being denied access to appropriate treatment and discharged prematurely without support, leaving patients and families struggling to cope. As I said at the start of my adjournment, even though it does largely relate to what is happening at Monash Health, it is around eating disorders and mental health, so I would seek that the Minister for Mental Health work with her colleague the Minister for Health to really get this issue sorted, provide the support and care for children with severe eating disorders and so give support to not only those children but also the family members that are involved.

Central west national parks

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:52): (684) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Environment in the other place, and it relates to a number of queries that I have had from constituents and other members of interest from the Bush User Groups United organisation, a volunteer organisation who are passionate about retaining the activities that occur in our state parks. Indeed Bill Schulz is a wonderful person who has moved into my electorate only recently, and his query relates to the VEAC CWI, which is the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council central west investigation. Members who have been around a little while will remember that Minister D'Ambrosio back in around 2017 I think it was instigated this investigation to look at tasking VEAC with what to do about state forests, and it is particularly in that Lerderderg western region area. Certainly the VEAC report came back with recommendations to turn three separate state parks into national parks and lock up 77,000 hectares. My constituent has gone on to say that of the various

submissions during that inquiry – there have been 2700 submissions – 67 per cent were actually against the creation of new national parks.

The issue that I have – and the conjecture that seems to be out in the community – is that there are some saying that the tabled report recommendations have all been accepted by the government but the government is now undertaking and using somewhere in the vicinity of \$4 million to make assessments and surveys about creating those three national parks. My constituents would like a status update. Has the minister somehow made recommendations or accepted recommendations and told certain people that these parks will be instigated? Has there been a nominal amount of money of \$4 million for surveys? I am asking for an update, an honest update, from the new minister as to the status, the funding and whether surveys have happened. Or is this just community conjecture and there is nothing to the rumour?

Country Fire Authority Wooragee station

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:54): (685) My matter is for the Minister for Emergency Services, and the action that I seek is for her to visit the Wooragee CFA to fully appreciate the brigade's desperate need for a new fit-for-purpose fire station. Wooragee volunteers were the last in the line of defence in major bushfire campaigns in 2003, 2006 and 2009, and yet their needs continue to be ignored. This is a brigade that last year celebrated 95 years of service to its community. This is a brigade that has had neighbouring land gifted to it for a new shed. This is a brigade that has been the number one priority for district 24 for several years only to be overlooked in successive budgets. This is a project the minister agreed was a priority in 2020.

The current sheds are a disgrace. One dates back to 1927 and the other is a 30-year-old Zinacume construction. The brigade uses a makeshift meeting room in the old shed after previously being forced to have open-air meetings on the driveway. Adding insult to injury is the CFA's push for sanitary bins in toilets. The brigade received a detailed explanation of the rollout just before Christmas, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the only toilets in the area are a shared facility with the local community. These toilets are now subject to increased usage as part of a newly created bike trail connecting popular tourist destinations Beechworth and Yackandandah.

The Victorian Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 requires employers to, so far as is reasonably practicable, provide adequate facilities for the welfare of employees at any workplace under their management and control. I think it is reasonable to expect that adequate facilities might be a dedicated toilet. That act is designed for employees, but for all intents and purposes these volunteers are employees who just do not get paid. And by way of precedent, those volunteers were considered employees when the COVID vaccination was deemed mandatory for their turnout at training or fires.

In this place we talk about equality and inclusion. We want more women in the CFA, and yet it is the one-percenters like this that continue to be the barrier. My colleague in the Assembly the member for Benambra has been lobbying for this upgrade since 2018. It is a \$1.5 million spend – about 0.004 per cent of what is the latest budget estimate for the Suburban Rail Loop. Wooragee is part of the Northern Victoria electorate and therefore part of the minister's own electorate – the electorate we share. I hope the minister can find the time to visit CFA volunteers at Wooragee and see the situation firsthand. Following that, perhaps even without it, the minister should ensure that the upgrade of the Wooragee CFA shed – *(Time expired)*

Responses

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (17:58): Tonight we have received 14 adjournments for a range of ministers, and in accordance with the standing orders I will see that responses are sought from them.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 5:58 pm.

*Joint sitting of Parliament***Legislative Council vacancy****Members of both houses met in Assembly chamber at 6:17 pm.**

The Clerk: Before proceeding with the business of this joint sitting, it is necessary to appoint a Chair.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier): I am delighted to move:

That the Honourable Shaun Leane, President of the Legislative Council, be appointed Chair of this joint sitting.

I understand he is willing to accept the nomination.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition): I second the motion.

The Clerk: Are there any other proposals? There being no other proposal, the Honourable Shaun Leane, President of the Legislative Council, will take the chair.

The CHAIR (Shaun Leane): Under the Constitution Act 1975 this joint sitting must be conducted in accordance with the rules adopted by the members present at the sitting. The first procedure, therefore, will be the adoption of the rules.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier): I move:

That joint rule of practice 2 be the rules for this joint sitting.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition): I second the motion.

Motion agreed to.

The CHAIR: The rules have been adopted; I therefore invite proposals from members for a person to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier): I propose:

That Mr Richard Welch be chosen to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council.

He is willing to accept the nomination. In order to satisfy the joint sitting as to the requirements of section 27A(4) of the Constitution Act 1975, I also advise I am in possession of advice from the Liberal Party's registered officer that Mr Richard Welch is the selection of the Liberal Party of Australia, the party previously represented in the Legislative Council by Dr Matthew Bach.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition): I second the proposal.

The CHAIR: Are there any further proposals? As there are no further nominations, I declare that nominations are closed. The question is:

That Mr Richard Welch be chosen to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council.

Question agreed to.

The CHAIR: I declare that Mr Richard Welch has been chosen to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council. I will advise the Governor accordingly.

I now declare the joint sitting closed.

Proceedings terminated 6:20 pm.