

PROOF

Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 30 October 2024

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Wednesday 30 October 2024

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

Bills**Voluntary Assisted Dying Amendment (Equity and Access) Bill 2024***Introduction and first reading*

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:34): I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017 to improve access to voluntary assisted dying and for other purposes, and I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I move:

That the second reading be made an order of the day for the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Papers**Parliamentary departments***Reports 2023–24*

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (09:35): I move, by leave:

That the Department of the Legislative Council report 2023–24 and the Department of Parliamentary Services report 2023–24 be tabled.

Motion agreed to.

Legalise Cannabis Victoria*Consultation Report: Medicinal Cannabis and Driving in Victoria – An Interim Proposal for Law Reform*

David ETTERSANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:35): I move, by leave:

That the consultation report *Medicinal Cannabis and Driving in Victoria: An Interim Proposal for Law Reform* October 2024 be tabled.

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Major Events Act 2009 – Major Sporting Event Orders, of 29 October 2024, under section 22 of the Act, for the following cricket matches held from 2024 to 2028 –

International Test Cricket Matches at the MCG.

One Day Internationals and Twenty20 Internationals at Junction Oval.

One Day Internationals and Twenty20 Internationals to be held at Kardinia Park.

One Day Internationals and Twenty20 Internationals at the MCG.

Twenty20 Domestic Cricket Matches (including Big Bash League and Women's Big Bash League) at the MCG.

Twenty20 Domestic Matches (including BBL and WBBL) at Docklands Stadium.

Twenty20 Domestic Matches (including BBL and WBBL) at Junction Oval.

Twenty20 Domestic Matches (including BBL and WBBL) at Kardinia Park.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in respect to Statutory Rule Nos. 109, 113 and 123.

Victorian Inspectorate – Report, 2023–24 (*Ordered to be published*).

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

Committees

Environment and Planning Committee

Membership

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:53): I move, by leave:

That Aiv Puglielli be a participating member of the Environment and Planning Standing Committee.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Middle East conflict

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:53): I move, by leave:

That this house:

- (1) notes that since the Legislative Council's resolution on 17 October 2023 concerning Israel and Gaza, which stated that this house 'stands with Israel', the following have occurred:
 - (a) Israel's parliament has designated the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) as a terrorist organisation;
 - (b) Israel has further prohibited UNRWA from conducting any activity or providing any aid inside Israel;
 - (c) Israel's decisions relating to the UNRWA oppose the United Nations Charter and violate the state of Israel's obligations under international law;
 - (d) Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the UNRWA, has stated that this move will 'increase the suffering of the Palestinians' and is 'nothing less than collective punishment';
- (2) further notes that UNRWA is a vital United Nations body with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to Palestinian refugees; and
- (3) calls on the Victorian government to advocate to the federal government to sanction the extremist Netanyahu government and to call for a permanent and lasting ceasefire.

Leave refused.

Members statements

Warrnambool Show

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (09:55): On Saturday I was amongst the thousands of south-west residents who attended the Warrnambool agricultural show. I was pleased to discuss the Allan Labor government's drought relief package for south-west Victoria with farmers as they visited my stall. Some farmers in Victoria's south-west are facing the lowest rainfall on record. Premier Jacinta Allan and Minister for Agriculture Ros Spence last month announced a \$13.53 million package to help farmers in 11 south-west local government areas, including Glenelg, Southern Grampians, Moyne, Warrnambool, Corangamite, Colac Otway, Surf Coast, West Wimmera, Ararat, Pyrenees and Golden Plains. Eligible farmers will receive up to \$5000 as a co-contribution grant to support water

infrastructure upgrades to pipes, tanks, troughs, tanks, dams et cetera, as well as financial and mental health support.

I offer congratulations to the Warrnambool Agricultural Society for what was another successful show, and on a gloriously sunny day. I want to particularly acknowledge the voluntary work of the committee and also the broader Warrnambool community in their support of our agricultural industries in the south-west.

Samantha Ratnam

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:56): For the past two years I have had the tremendous pleasure of sitting in this place with Dr Samantha Ratnam. Samantha is one of the rarest of people who gets even more extraordinary the more time you spend with them. When someone asks me what leadership looks like, Samantha comes to mind. It is her picture next to the definition. Her moral clarity, courage of conviction, genuine care and compassion for the community and ability to speak truth to power are without parallel in this place, which is unfortunate, because if we had more Samanthas, Victoria would be the better for it. Her ability to work with people across the chamber is demonstrated by the respect she commands and her track record of achieving real-world outcomes for the community. Samantha's warmth and generosity, her humour and quick thinking and her extraordinary tenacity have been loved by so many MPs and staff of all stripes.

While I am excited for what Samantha will bring to our federal Parliament and beyond and thrilled to be joined by the extraordinary Anasina Gray-Barberio next week, it is going to take me a while to get used to not being able to lean over and seek her wise counsel. Thank you for everything, Samantha. You have left an extraordinary legacy.

Digamber Jain Sansthan Melbourne

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:57): I recently had the privilege of visiting the Digamber Jain Sansthan Melbourne centre in Rowville. DJSM was recently the recipient of \$22,300 of funding to renovate and upgrade the centre through the latest round of the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, and I note that they were particularly grateful to Minister Stitt for that funding. I had the opportunity to go on a tour of the site to see all the incredible work they have done so far and their ambitious plans for what the site will become in future, as well as joining them for a morning tea and presentation. I would like to thank president Ayan Jain, secretary Ankit, vice-president Avinash and all of the committee members for being such gracious hosts, making me feel welcome and giving me a tour. They spoke in particular about many of the concepts of Jainism, including the concept of anekantavada, which is a particularly relevant concept for those of us in this place because it is one that talks about pluralism and embracing many different perspectives but coming together as one – something that I think we can all share in and enjoy when we have our vigorous and robust debates in this place. The DJSM was established in 2017, and it acts as a cultural, spiritual and community hub for the Jain community in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region and indeed across Victoria.

Local government elections

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (09:59): Voting has now closed for Victoria's local council elections. The Western Metro Region fielded a huge array of candidates across our many councils, and I have heard that for the most part those local government elections were fought in the right spirit, and that is what we need for democracy to work. But I did hear and I did see with my own eyes some extremely concerning issues.

The first was the disgusting, slanderous pamphlets and online harassment that was not only unbecoming of anyone who seeks election but also unbecoming of anyone who is an adult. I hope that anyone with any information will report it so that next time around we will not see that kind of vile behaviour. The second was totally shocking and a real threat to the integrity of this election, and that was the news reports firstly of an attempted break-in of a postbox in Tarneit, a successful break-in of a postbox in Bayside City Council and the theft of an Australia Post collection vehicle. Again, I hope

that the culprits are found and charged. Lastly, I heard from multiple residents that because Australia Post has removed so many of its postboxes – presumably a cost-cutting exercise – finding a postbox has become increasingly difficult. Many are located within shopping centres and cannot even be accessed after hours.

Whoever is elected will have the honour of representing their constituents, and I wish them all well. So good luck, and may the best candidate win.

Housing

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:00): Last week I had the pleasure of joining the Premier and the Minister for Planning in Middle Brighton to announce the government's plans to enable more families and young people to own homes in sought-after suburbs right across Melbourne. The only way to solve the housing crisis is to build more homes, and the Allan Labor government is committed to building more homes in great communities – homes close to trains and trams, meaning more homes near amenities that people need to use. On the Sandringham train line with its frequent peak-hour services there will be four new activity centres in North Brighton, Middle Brighton, Hampton and Sandringham, near the stations. For the next generation who want to remain living near their family: this will offer you the opportunity so that you can. For the family who want to stay to raise their children in these inner and middle suburbs: this provides hope that you can. Indeed for all those who want to access the great lifestyle that these suburbs have to offer but believe it might be out of reach: this is for you. This Labor government is dedicated to building more homes and providing more opportunities, and I am absolutely proud that my constituents in Southern Metropolitan will be some of the first to feel the benefits of this opportunity and securing their future.

Horseracing

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (10:02): The Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses have just released their annual *Deathwatch* report, detailing that 151 horses were killed on Australian racetracks in the last year. That is one horse every 2.4 days, with 44 of them killed right here in Victoria. But just like with other racing codes, what we know is that the toll is actually much higher, with even more deaths in track work, training and trials, which do not have to be reported under racing rules. And then of course there are the thousands upon thousands of racehorses sent to knackeries and abattoirs when no longer useful or profitable, seen as nothing more than commodities to this brutal industry. Year after year during Spring Racing Carnival we see the industry desperately try and cling on to their social licence, with a growing number of Victorians, especially young Victorians, turning their backs on this hideous industry that is responsible for not only animal cruelty but increased gambling harm and higher rates of family violence too. It does not matter how many fake music festivals the industry puts on in an attempt to drive up dwindling crowds, the writing is on the wall. More and more Victorians are saying nup to the cup. I am proud to be one of them, and I hope that my colleagues will join me too.

CERES

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:03): CERES – gosh, I love CERES. Last week I celebrated CERES and their new community hall. CERES is a cherished environmental education centre. It is a community garden, urban farm and social enterprise hub that fosters a deep connection between Victorians and our natural world. Each year half a million people from all backgrounds visit CERES. Through the Allan Labor government's investment of over \$1.2 million CERES now offers improved community spaces, expanded educational programs and additional job opportunities. The new CERES HQ office, built with sustainable materials, and the refurbished red train, now an inspired children's space – and perfect for kids parties, I hear – do highlight our commitment to a thriving, inclusive and sustainable community. I even got some time to buy a new plant for my apartment at their ever popular nursery. Thank you to their chair Andrew Hewett and CEO Cinnamon Evans for inviting me to open these wonderful spaces, and I look forward to working with the incoming chair

Nicole Baker. I also want to thank all the amazing, incredible, outstanding volunteers and staff that make CERES such a true gem of the inner north.

Legalise Cannabis Victoria

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (10:04): Who doesn't love a birthday, especially when you are young? It was remiss of me last sitting week not to have acknowledged the second birthday of the registration of Legalise Cannabis Victoria. Hasn't it been an exciting two years? Legalise Cannabis has caught a wave of enthusiasm from the public, not only for cannabis and drug reform but also for progressive and pragmatic reform that gets stuff done. In terms of members, we note with excitement that nationally Legalise Cannabis is the fastest growing political party. Likewise, we have seen a steady improvement in our electoral performance, with multiple by-elections and state elections indicating an underlying primary vote of between 4 and 12 per cent. We also have high hopes, if you will pardon the pun, of seeing a graduate of this place, Ms Fiona Patten, elected to the Senate in the new year.

While Legalise Cannabis is so young, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the amazing persistence of many of our members and their fellow travellers, who have been campaigning on the reform issue for some 50 years. We thank and congratulate them. So happy birthday and many happy electoral returns to Legalise Cannabis Victoria.

Anzac: The Greek Chapter

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:06): I rise to acknowledge the recent successful screening of a new and powerful documentary, *Anzac: The Greek Chapter*, telling the story of the Anzacs who served in Greece in 1941. The film recently premiered at this year's Greek Film Festival in Sydney and Melbourne, with around 700 attendees at screenings to date. The Lemnos Gallipoli Commemorative Committee has overseen the production of this film through a grant from the Australian government's Saluting Their Service funding program.

The film features many of the Anzacs who served in Greece telling their own story in their own words. This unique presentation has only been made possible through the dedication of historian Dr Peter Ewer, who many years ago had the foresight to interview these soldiers and nurses. As the author of a history of the campaign, *Forgotten Anzacs*, Dr Ewer was able to encourage these veterans to share their stories. Drawing on over 130 hours of Peter's veteran interview archive combined with the still photographs and other archival footage, this film provides a unique snapshot into the lived experience of these veterans.

The committee engaged Dr Ewer and filmmaker John Irwin to produce the film, assisted by historian Jim Claven OAM, who has also written on the campaign in his book *Grecian Adventure*. Jim has played an important role over many years in successfully encouraging a number of Victorian veterans' families to donate their personal archives to our own State Library Victoria. I also thank well-known journalist Barrie Cassidy, himself a son of a Greek campaign veteran, for providing his services as narrator to the project. The team was ably assisted by committee member Ms Vicki Kyritsis, a board director of the Greek Community of Melbourne, who has secured its screenings to date and into the future.

I am proud to have been associated with this production of this documentary, and I thank all those who have supported this important legacy project. I look forward to the announcement of future screenings across Australia and overseas.

*Production of documents***Bridge maintenance**

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (10:07): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes the challenges of objectively measuring and maintaining the safety of ageing bridges is a critical issue that has been known about for over a decade and reported on many times, including in the Victorian Auditor-General's December 2011 report, *Management of Road Bridges*;
- (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, all documents relating to the management and safety of ageing road and rail bridge infrastructure, including but not limited to:
 - (a) the government's internal or unpublished responses to the Auditor-General's report on management of road bridges;
 - (b) funding arrangement negotiations with the Commonwealth government for the bridge renewal program from 2011 onwards;
 - (c) changes in safety standards and safety inspections from 2011 onwards, including the organisations, representative bodies, or individuals who were consulted; and
 - (d) the most recent indicative timeframes and associated changes in the risk for the replacement or renewal of road and rail bridge infrastructure, such as safety risk mitigation reports from independent auditors and internal experts.

All around the world the last 15 years has demonstrated that ageing bridge infrastructure is a critical and complex challenge for every country. In Victoria the difficulties inherent in objectively measuring and maintaining the safety of our ageing bridges has been known about for over a decade and reported on many times, including by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report *Management of Road Bridges* in 2011. We also know that in 2022, in an effort to address this increasing risk to the safety of our community, the Labor government committed \$82.5 million and spent a minimum of \$20 million investing in Eloque's bridge sensor technology. I will not rehash it, but we know that that did not work. That effort failed, but I still believe that the people of Victoria deserve to know the true state of our bridges and what the government has been doing to ensure that they are safe for users and what the plans are, if any, for the necessary decommission and replacement of those ageing bridges deemed to be unsafe or predicted to be unsafe in the coming years.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:09): I rise to share a few comments on the short-form documents motion which has been put to us today by Mrs Deeming, and in accordance with the government's usual practice in this place I affirm that the government will not be opposing this motion today. It is always of course an important subject when it comes to discussing the maintenance of critical assets such as road and railway infrastructure, including bridges. Standing here today, I acknowledge that over the past 10 years the Allan Labor government has invested considerably in our road and rail network. Of course we have seen great expansions and great upgrades from new roads right through to new railway lines. Indeed I believe there have been well over 80 level crossing removals now, which has improved the safety of road and rail traffic across metropolitan Melbourne in particular but also in some other parts, including Geelong.

I note that that by definition means that we have created many more bridges which will require maintenance as well. I think the government's track record illustrates a very strong record when it comes to maintaining those assets. I note in particular the references in Mrs Deeming's motion to a 2011 Victorian Auditor-General's Office report on maintaining Victoria's road bridges. VAGO, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office, is one of our most important accountability institutions in this state. I, along with other members of this place, have the privilege of serving on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, which has an important oversight role of VAGO. We get to see at the same level as other people but also with much more of a greater focus the types of reports that VAGO does.

It has done a number of reports when it comes to important issues such as this but also in terms of the management of those things. I note that the 2011 report which Mrs Deeming refers to has fundamentally two components to it. One is about VicRoads and the state road management of our bridge network, as well as that role of local councils. I note that the particular VAGO report to which this motion refers did pick up some challenges at the time of its publication in 2011, which was of course in the period of the last Liberal–Nationals government, one which was renowned for achieving three-quarters of completely nothing.

By stark contrast this is a government that is investing, and I mentioned that \$6 billion over 10 years of investment in upgrading and maintaining our road network. I note the recent announcement of \$964 million by the Allan Labor government for a road maintenance blitz across Victoria. We have seen changing weather conditions. We have seen in some cases the effects of climate change and flooding put added strain onto our road network, particularly in regional areas and particularly in those cases where it comes to riverine areas and bridges where those floodwaters can cause some damage as well.

This is why this is, I would say, a timely motion for us to be looking at. As I say, that work is very much already underway and indeed already underway by this Parliament. The Environment and Planning Committee is undertaking an inquiry into climate resilience, which is one important part of this because the changing climate, changing weather patterns, do very much affect road conditions. We have all seen that in the wake of heavy rains over the past few years where that has led to worsening road conditions which have required additional maintenance.

I saw that particularly in my region, with the community coming to me to raise the issue of Napoleon Road on the Rowville–Lysterfield border, following which we were able to get that road upgraded, including a full rebuild of a couple of the key intersections so that they would not degrade again. To do that work properly is very important. There was a huge amount of work, and that is why it is so important that we see the \$964 million investment announced by Minister Horne, who has been very committed to doing everything she can to make sure that our roads and, as part of that, our road bridges and other transport bridges are of the strongest quality and are maintained as they have been and as they will continue to be.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:14): It is my pleasure to speak on this motion brought forward by Mrs Deeming. We should not be surprised, I guess, by the state of our roads and bridges here in Victoria. We know that when Labor cannot manage money, it is our roads and infrastructure and bridges that pay the price for that, and many Victorians across the state are indeed paying the price. We have got net debt which is set to reach \$187 billion by 2027–28 and interest repayments – just to service the debt, by the way – of about \$1 million per hour. That is plenty of bridges per hour that we could get going and get to fixing if this government had not wasted so much money over their decade of incompetence.

The roads and bridges across my electorate are crumbling because of this government. We know that the roads maintenance budget has been significantly deteriorating and remains 16 per cent below what it was in 2020. The budget papers reveal a 69 per cent reduction in the level of maintenance undertaken on regional roads in 2023–24. Nearly 400 kilometres of roads have speed reductions due to poor pavement condition. One of them is Watson Street in Wallan, by the way, in my electorate, which has had a 40-kilometres-an-hour speed limit sign for a couple of years because the state of the road is so poor because this government has failed to invest in roads and in fixing potholes. It is a fundamental responsibility to keep our roads up to scratch.

The federal government have been no help with this. Anthony ‘Airbus’ Albanese has taken an axe to road funding, particularly in regard to bridges. That has massively reduced the share for Victoria, which used to be quite significant – a funding share of about \$86.6 million – but no more. No bridges for Victorians but free upgrades for Airbus Albanese is what we are getting under this government.

I remember a time when Tim Pallas and Labor initiated the Our Fair Share campaign during the 2019 federal election campaign – I remember it well; they spent millions of dollars on it – because of being ripped off by the Commonwealth government. It is a campaign which the Auditor-General has slammed and one that they have not ruled out doing again. I encourage looking at doing it again, because the federal government has cut funding for roads and bridges in Victoria – roads and bridges that are deteriorating.

We know the Victorian government cannot manage money, and everyone is paying the price, but at least some sort of contribution from Canberra – or at least when Canberra reduces funding to roads and bridges in Victoria, maybe make some noise about it. They are very quiet about Airbus Albo at the moment. He is happy to take free upgrades for his personal travel because he is best mates with the former Qantas CEO but not happy to fund bridges in our communities. You would think the Labor members would make some noise about that. You would think they would, given their form, maybe run a taxpayer-funded ad campaign slamming the federal government. We know that the federal government has cut infrastructure funding to Victoria. If they feel so strongly about it, I encourage them to run the same campaign against Albanese – but no. As the Auditor-General has stated, it was a blatant misuse of taxpayer funding. You would rather spend millions on political advertising campaigns than actually fund our roads and bridges. That says everything about this government – shame. I will be supporting this.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:18): I rise to speak on Mrs Deeming's documents motion. I will get to Mr Mulholland's contribution in a minute. There are some interesting facts that I think would help elucidate – I am just trying to find them – the points he was making.

Mrs Deeming in her documents motion is seeking to obtain some documents with respect to the management and safety of road and rail bridge infrastructure here in Victoria, including internal or unpublished responses to the Auditor-General's report on the management of road bridges; funding arrangement negotiations with the Commonwealth government for the bridge renewal program from 2011 onwards; changes in safety standards and safety inspections from 2011 onwards, including the organisations, representative bodies or individuals who were consulted; and the most recent indicative timeframes and associated changes in the risk for the replacement or renewal of road and rail bridge infrastructure, such as safety risk mitigation reports from independent auditors and experts.

Obviously the government does not have a practice of opposing documents motions, and we will not be doing so today. The motion is seeking access to documents relating to the Auditor-General's investigation into the management of road bridges, which largely occurred during that brief moment when the Liberal Party were in government, when they had two premiers in four years. They were unceremoniously booted out after that point.

What we do know is that in this report and the period that this report covers – and this was noted in the Auditor-General's report, and Mrs Deeming is obviously seeking access to further information here – the Auditor-General in 2011 found that the previous government had 'not formed detailed long-term plans' for the management of these vital transport connections and had not done the work necessary to 'adequately inform longer term resourcing decisions'. If we are interested in documents relating to the management of road bridges, we think it is particularly important to understand that the Auditor-General found that the Liberals, when they were in government, had no long-term plans. Everyone knew that of course, because it was a shambolic government.

David Davis interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: It is not rubbish, Mr Davis. It is the Auditor-General's opinion. If you have such a low opinion of the Auditor-General, Mr Davis –

David Davis interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: You do like the Auditor-General, and all I am doing is quoting what the Auditor-General said about the Liberals' management of our road infrastructure here in Victoria: they had 'not formed detailed long-term plans' and they had not done the work to 'adequately inform longer term resourcing decisions'. The Auditor-General's report recommended that the government develop long-term, comprehensive plans to maintain these vital road assets and connect communities across the state. That is what Labor has done since we have been elected. We have invested in our roads. We invested in the last budget and in previous decades \$6.6 billion to maintain our road bridges.

Mr Mulholland in his contribution talked about Commonwealth contributions to roads, and he complained about advocacy from Labor that Victoria deserves its fair share of infrastructure funding. Labor will never apologise for demanding that Victoria get its fair share of Commonwealth funding. We know that under the Liberals, when the Liberals were in power in Canberra, Victoria received less than our fair share, less than our population was entitled to. I know this because I wrote a report on it, and I gave evidence to a parliamentary inquiry about the underfunding of Victorian infrastructure when the Liberals were in power in the Commonwealth. If I had the time, I would very happily go into quite considerable detail about not only the extent of underfunding in the budget but the fact that even when the federal Liberal Party could not give us enough of our allocation in the budget, it was underspent. The federal Liberals could not even manage to get the money that they promised Victorians out the door, which was less than we were entitled to. We will support Mrs Deeming's motion to get these documents because this is a very important issue.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:24): I, like others in this chamber, am lending my support to the documents motion as per the convention that has been long practised in this place. Can I take a moment to begin by thanking Mrs Deeming for bringing this before us today. As has very much already been discussed but is worth repeating, this motion seeks the release of documents in relation to the Auditor-General's investigation into the previous Liberal-National government's management of road bridges.

I think it is fair to say that in 2011 the Auditor-General found that the previous government had not formed detailed and long-term plans, and we know that these are just so necessary for the management of these vital transport connections, and they had not done the work necessary to adequately inform some long-term resourcing decisions. The report went on to recommend that the government develop comprehensive long-term plans to maintain these vital road assets that connect communities and businesses right across the state.

I could go into a list of some of the roads that this motion lends itself to and some of the critical investments that have been made by the Allan Labor government over the last few years, but I will say that we are enormously proud of the efforts that we have made to heed similar expert advice and we have made subsequent investments to the tune of \$6.6 billion to maintain our roads and bridges over a decade through to last year's budget. This is really the sort of certainty that is absolutely necessary for industry, for business, for families and for communities.

Let me just be really blunt about it: we need long-term road maintenance strategies that deliver work strategically right across the state. A multi-year funding approach allows us to mitigate the future risks in advance rather than waiting for that year-on-year funding, which we do know and have heard from experts can really be an inefficient way to plan our spend. It also means that we are much more data driven in our approach and much more targeted in our spending, allowing us to take a more holistic, whole-of-network view to prioritising our investment. We have certainly been working on building a really contemporary approach to road maintenance that enables us to target our investment strategically through our new 10-year funding model.

It is worth saying that we also need to consider more frequent floods. I had the good fortune, with other members here, to sit on the flood inquiry and hear about the very real impacts that more frequent and severe floods are having on our roads right across the state. I am thinking too particularly of the north and the north-east through the flood inquiry, and I thank the members of the community who

came forward and gave evidence during that time. We know that we need to adapt to the challenges of climate change, and very much more frequent, more intense and much more damaging flood events are a part of that mix, so that is what we are doing through the 10-year strategy.

We have recently announced the start of works on this year's road maintenance program thanks to the \$964 million investment from this government. That is equivalent to \$2.6 million every single day and is the largest single-year investment in our state's history. The crews are out there, they are on the roads, and I just finish my remarks by reminding people to please drive safely around our road crews. They are trying to make our roads safer for all users, and I encourage you to respect that on our roads.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Energy policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:28): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes the government's mismanagement of its Victorian energy upgrade program, which has seen:
 - (a) Victorians paying up to three times more for a tonne of carbon dioxide removed from the atmosphere under the state's program compared with other equivalent schemes in other Australian jurisdictions;
 - (b) the total cost impact of the Victorian program on industry and consumers likely to hit \$652 million in 2024, representing a 30 per cent increase over just 12 months and a rise from \$88 million a decade ago;
 - (c) the Victorian energy efficiency certificate become the most expensive in the country, at \$108.50 in October 2024;
 - (d) Victorian households pay \$188 per annum per household using 6000 kilowatt hours of electricity per annum in green scheme bill payments, non-transparently incorporated in the energy bills of Victorian consumers;
 - (e) the Victorian government deliver multiple refrigerators to the premises of individual small businesses as part of a rort;
 - (f) the Victorian scheme placed under review; and
- (2) condemns the Minister for Energy and Resources for her waste, incompetence and the additional load she has thoughtlessly placed on Victorian families during a cost-of-living crisis.

This motion is not a motion about whether green schemes are a good or a bad thing. This is a motion about the administration and the management of these schemes. This is a motion about whether you can deliver a scheme that achieves certain stated objectives of greenhouse gas abatement in a responsible and economically efficient way.

What we know is that the Victorian government has really struggled here. Few of us will forget those television images as not one, not two, not four, but six and eight and 10 fridges were delivered to business premises. The businesses might have wanted one fridge – a low-energy fridge – or they might have wanted two, but few of them wanted six or 10 fridges. It just does not seem competent to deliver 10 fridges outside the door of a local small business.

John Berger: What are you yelling for?

David DAVIS: Well, what do you think? Do you think it is a good idea or are you wanting to defend such absurd behaviour? How can this be? How can it be that the incompetent minister could deliver six fridges to one business?

Tom McIntosh: She personally delivered six fridges?

David DAVIS: She arranged the delivery through the program she administers.

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: Do you think this is a great idea, do you? I do not think it is a great idea. I want to start with those images. That is the image of Lily D'Ambrosio basically administering a program that delivered multiple fridges to locations. That is a scheme out of control. It is a scheme that has lost its way. I have to say that that is not the only point I would make on all of this.

What we have seen here is the Australian Pipelines and Gas Association look closely at these schemes and make some significant points. I am going to quote from their news releases, particularly the September 2024 release, 'The Victorian government's poor tax a dud deal for Victorians':

The Victorian Government's 'flagship' electrification program is spiralling out of control ...

We now know that it is been placed under review. It has been placed under systemic –

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: You surely would agree with it being placed under review – huge amounts of money being splurged out and multiple fridges being delivered to people's premises. Really very few people would defend that and say that this is a well-run program. If you are sincere about wanting to abate greenhouse gas emissions, you would want the scheme run the most efficiently that it can possibly be run, because you will get the most abatement out of an efficiently run scheme; you will get less abatement out of an inefficient scheme. Concerned people like me will line up with people who want greater abatement, because they want an efficient program to deliver a better outcome, not an inefficient program to deliver less greenhouse gas abatement.

The Australian Pipelines and Gas Association went on to say that:

The Victorian energy upgrades scheme is on track to cost more than \$650 million in 2024 – an increase of nearly 30 per cent over the past 12 months.

Goodness. It is not delivering any more abatement, it is just costing more. Who pays this? People need to understand who pays this, and it is households. Households are paying it. Households are paying it on their bill. They are paying it as a secret wedge on every household bill. Every single household in Victoria is paying this money. It is not transparent, and the scale of it is not transparent. They went on:

The trade-weighted average of 12-month historic VEEC spot prices, the Essential Services Commission's ... preferred method for calculating ... costs, rose from \$16.87 in 2014 to \$97.44 as of September 26, 2024.

This has driven up annual VEU costs, which are paid for by Victorians through ... electricity bills ... \$88 million a decade ago to a projected \$652 million today – an increase of 639 per cent over the past decade.

You can go online and you can compare the different green schemes around Australia. You can go online and you can –

Tom McIntosh: You've been doing your research, Mr Davis. It is good.

David DAVIS: Many people have, and people might want to go and look at the different schemes.

Tom McIntosh: You are across your brief.

David DAVIS: You might be surprised to know that Victoria is the most expensive scheme in Australia. Other schemes are in the range of \$30 to \$60. Some are slightly less and there are other ones around the country, but Victoria is up at over \$100 for the equivalent. We are much more expensive, and you have got to ask why. I say there is one reason: it is Lily D'Ambrosio. It is the minister, one of the most incompetent ministers that we have seen, one of the most incompetent ministers to administer major government programs, doing huge, huge damage to Victorians through the blowout in costs.

It is worth just putting on the record the figures that come from the St Vincent's tracker. The St Vincent's tracker indicates, while Victoria's energy costs –

Tom McIntosh: Gavin Dufty is your best mate.

David DAVIS: Gavin Dufty is a very, very smart guy. He is a very good researcher. You should read this material. I am very happy to direct you to his recent work: *The NEM: Where Prices Are High and Innovation Is Low*. This is a St Vincent de Paul work. Picking up your point, if I turn to page 7 of that very same work – and I think it is very good work – it says:

In comparison to July 2022, regulated standing offer prices (the base-rate) have increased in all jurisdictions. The size of the increase, however, does vary significantly. **In Victoria electricity prices have increased by approximately 28%** ...

That is the largest increase in the country. It also says, on gas prices:

Gas prices have increased in all jurisdictions since July 2022 with the increases being greatest in Victoria (22%) ...

That is on page 8 for you on the other side of the chamber. You will be able to read that directly and see the work that Mr Dufty has done in working his way through the actual figures on what households in Victoria are paying. It is not estimated figures, it is not default offers; it is actually what they pay. He went back and looked at the bills. He added up people's bills, and electricity costs went up 28 per cent in one year and the gas costs went up 22 per cent. That is the base that we are facing here.

One of the things in that same publication that I would draw the chamber's attention to is on pages 17 and 18, where it looks at the additional costs of policies and programs. It says here, in paragraph 2 on page 17:

For Victoria, the 'green scheme' costs included in section 2 above were the Large-scale Renewable Energy Target at \$10.40/MWh and the Small-scale Renewable Energy Scheme at \$6.86/MWh. However, Victorians also pay for the Victorian Energy Upgrades scheme at \$11.18/MWh and solar Feed-in Tariffs (social cost of carbon) at \$16.95/customer. As such, the Victorian Energy Upgrades (VEU) program is estimated to cost Victorian consumers more than the Large-scale Renewable Energy Target ...

Then he breaks out in chart 8 – this is a very good read – the bill stack, as he calls it, of the Victorian market. Then if you go to page 18, he spends some time looking through chart 9. Chart 9 shows green scheme costs in each jurisdiction and says:

It shows that Victorians have the highest 'green scheme' costs at \$188 per annum for households using 6,000kWh per annum while customers in Queensland currently have the lowest (around \$90 per annum).

Chart 9 is a very instructive chart. It actually shows that we are paying more, but we are not getting the abatement volume that we could get if we ran our schemes efficiently. That is the point here. You have got a minister who is an ideologue over here and pressing very hard, but she cannot run programs to deliver the objectives that she is seeking to achieve. She cannot run them efficiently; she cannot run them effectively.

It then goes on, on page 18 – this is the St Vincent de Paul and Alvis Consulting paper of November 2023 – to say:

However, we continue to be concerned about the equity of these charges. While high consumption households will pay more for 'green schemes' (when the charges are linked to usage), these households also typically have more options, and incentives, to alter usage ... replace or upgrade appliances, as well as making improvements to dwellings themselves. Low consumption households, on the other hand, typically have few appliances to start with and are likely to live in smaller dwellings with limited improvement options. These households simply have to pay for the additional charges without being able to reduce their costs.

David Limbrick: What about renters?

David DAVIS: I am going to come to that in a minute. It continues:

At the same time, these households' contribution to the emissions released by household energy consumption is lower.

In our view, these equity issues warrant a debate around how governments pass on the cost of 'green schemes'.

Then they talk about other options.

This is a reverse Robin Hood tax. That is what it is. Robin Hood was famous for robbing the rich and giving to the poor. Well, Lily D'Ambrosio and Jacinta Allan rob the poor and pay it to the rich. They steal from the poor and pay it to the rich.

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: It is a reverse Robin Hood tax, and you know it is true. It is a nasty tax. It is a secret tax, and it is a tax that hits hardest the poorest households. Mr Limbrick's point is also right. It is harder for renters. Renters are paying this tax – they are paying the electricity tax and they have less ability to deal with this. There are real equity issues with this particular approach that has been adopted by Labor.

You have got to ask why Labor is so determined to mismanage this program. It is under review, although the minister has said it is steaming on for years into the future. She has got a flawed scheme under review, but she is going to steam on with it anyway – the most expensive scheme of its type in the country. You have got to ask why they cannot run the program properly, help average families cut costs and potentially deliver more greenhouse gas abatement than they would otherwise deliver. You have got to really wonder what the state government is up to on these key points.

On solar there are very significant issues. We have obviously got the feed-in tariffs coming off from the original times of the scheme going back a number of years and of course the solar contribution to the NEM, the overall grid, is significant through certain parts of the day. It does drive the electricity costs into the negative. It leads to difficulty in terms of the fluctuations and there has got to be significant thought given to how that is best managed into the future. The government has cut the rebates for those who were early adopters. Some are very unhappy with that, and I understand that. I can see that people feel they have in good faith invested but that has not been fully honoured by the government.

On the energy efficiency program, though, Keiran Rooney wrote a very good piece in the *Age* on 9 October where he pointed to these problems. He made the point that under the federal green scheme units are valued at about \$36.05, whereas under the Victorian energy efficiency credit scheme units are hitting well over \$100 – \$108.50. While not every state scheme operates in the same way, no other scheme is priced at more than \$41 per certificate. He goes on to say:

The Allan government said the programs differed because the federal scheme was intended to reduce emissions in areas such as forestry and agriculture, while the Victorian one was focused on saving households money through efficient appliances.

But they are paying of course. Minister D'Ambrosio said:

... the government would reform the program under new laws in a bid to reduce pressures on the system.

The changes will remove a strict time limit on when the certificates can be validated. They will also extend the scheme's end date by 15 years to 2045. The state's energy regulator, the Essential Services Commission, will also get stronger enforcement powers. But this is all very late in the piece and this is a minister who has failed. The Australian Energy Council in that same article pointed out that energy consumers are paying for increasing VEU costs, which have steadily grown since 2020 from around \$30 to more than \$100 now. The Victorian price, they said, is far too high, especially compared to other efficiency schemes in Australia, which is resulting in Victorian customers paying more for the scheme compared to other states.

The two-year review is underway. Victoria will set interim VEEC targets for retailers in 2026–27 while the two-year review is underway. A two-year review? Why do we need a two-year review? Why can't we have a short, sharp review that deals with the issues and the problems in the program? This is households suffering and again just a lack of urgency by this government – a failure to understand that they have got to get moving, that they have got to get an efficient scheme in place. If you want to

achieve your abatement objectives, run an efficient scheme. Do not run an inefficient scheme. If you want to run a fair program, do not slug the poor and pay the rich – find a way to actually run the scheme fairly. This government has not as yet done that. If you want to save money, do not deliver multiple fridges to local businesses. Do not deliver multiple fridges again and again to different sites when they clearly only need one or two maximum.

It is hard to think of a more shambolic scheme than the way this has been run. We all know this because we all get the calls. We all get the calls to replace the fan and this and that, which have been variously ineffective and rorted by many – that is the truth of the matter. This minister, this scheme: you have got to give them a very low mark, and it is, unfortunately for Victorian consumers, all purchased at a very, very high cost when families are really struggling in a cost-of-living crisis.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:47): I also rise to speak in support of this motion. I have spoken many times in here about the Victorian energy upgrades program. It is a magnet for mismanagement, rorting and inefficiency. There is barely anything positive that I can say about it. If you look at the carbon accounting that they use for it, this seems like this magical accounting system. I do not think there is anyone that seriously believes in our contribution to changing the weather through making people pay more on their electricity bills.

My only real concern with this motion and what Mr Davis is saying is the idea that somehow the Liberal Party can run it better and more efficiently. I would urge the Liberal Party to suck it up on this and admit the truth that the Victorian energy upgrades program needs to be abolished. That is what we need to do with it. If these figures are right, then that would result in a saving to all Victorians of \$188 per annum on their electricity bill. All of this rorting and mismanagement would disappear instantly, and guess what, if there is a more efficient appliance for someone in the market, maybe they would buy it because it is more efficient rather than getting someone calling you up and saying you are going to get it for free, apparently.

I could go on and on and on about all of these crazy gadgets that companies have hoodwinked the government and energy companies into delivering. I have spoken before here about the chimney pillows. They came around and put pillows into people's houses so that they would not get drafts. Of course because they were free, when the pillows inevitably burst there were none for sale that you could replace them with. Why would anyone sell something when it has been given away for free? They also gave out free compact fluorescent globes to everyone, which were soon made obsolete by LED lights, and now people have piles of these old compact fluorescent globes in their houses. The fridges, as was mentioned by Mr Davis – I wonder how many carbon emissions were saved in the accounting by those.

David Davis: Ferrying fridges around.

David LIMBRICK: Yes. I wonder how much those fridges changed the weather – probably not much, I would imagine. The whole scheme has no prospect of rehabilitation or efficiency, and I call on the government and the opposition to commit to abolishing this scheme.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:50): Well, this has been quite riveting listening indeed, I must say. We know the Liberals do not have policies or a plan when it comes to energy. We know they cannot even mention the words 'climate change'. The Nationals do have a plan; the only problem is that it is directed out of Queensland – obviously with no climate policies, but their energy plan is given to them by their masters in Queensland, so that is what they bring to the table. It is incredible – after 25 years of this conversation where we have recognised and understood we need to change the way that our energy is generated, they are unable to bring anything to the table.

David Davis interjected.

Tom McINTOSH: So let us go through this slowly, Mr Davis. When a household consumes an item and when they have to pay for that item, if they can avoid consuming it, they will save money,

and that is exactly what this program has done and will continue to do into the future. In the early days there was low-hanging fruit – incandescent lights, draught proofing, various matters – so that we could reduce the amount of electricity that Victorians were using within their homes.

Mr Davis turns his back because he does not want to listen; he just wants to reel off a few cherrypicked stats that he brings into the place.

David Davis interjected.

Tom McINTOSH: It is interesting, Mr Davis – I will acknowledge Mr Welch is here, but of the rest of your colleagues there is not one here in the whole place. There is no-one here supporting you.

We reduce the demand within Victorians' homes, and that reduces their energy bills. Another thing that happens when you reduce demand is that the cost to purchase that item goes down as well – supply and demand, which you guys might remember from last century and some of the things that you were believing in rather than just opposing. Not only has this government set up a scheme that has saved Victorians money in their own homes through minimising their energy consumption, it has also reduced the cost to every single Victorian when they purchase energy.

The other thing that this scheme does – because there are a couple of things, and I know it is hard for you guys to walk and chew gum over there – regards this little item called climate change, where emissions go into the atmosphere, trap the heat in the earth's atmosphere and the earth warms up. Now we are at 1.5 degrees above 1850, pre-industrial levels. That is a little bit of a problem because our soils become less productive, from an agricultural perspective. The infrastructure that we built over the last hundred years, including transmission lines, was built for the climate we traditionally had on this part of the continent. As you get hotter and more humid conditions in the atmosphere, you get more violent storm events. We see that impact our infrastructure. We see that smash residents. We see the costs of insurance bills. I have talked about this many, many times. So Mr Davis, we need these policies to reduce our carbon emissions. I think it is 4.7 megatons per year that this program is reducing, and if we are looking at needing to get 80 megatons out of our atmosphere by our goal of 2045, with our net zero goals, this is making a substantial contribution. It is why we are down 42 per cent.

Mr Davis leaves the chamber once I start talking about emissions. He does not want to hear about emissions. He wants to scream and shout, but he does not want to actually talk about emissions. We are down 42 per cent on peak emissions in this state. That is why when dealing with this we need a collection of initiatives to drive those emissions down, to ensure we have generation and to ensure that our demand is as minimal as it can be to save Victorians as much money as possible. Mr Davis asks why we are looking at the program. First of all, let us acknowledge that New South Wales and Queensland have adopted the program, because it has been successful. As I have said, it has saved people money and it is driving down emissions. But it is also what is to come.

Whaling was the greatest source of energy 120 years ago. If Mr Davis had his way, we would still be whaling to fill lamps. We would be getting the oil out. But do you know what? They ran out of blue whales. It was not economic to send tonnes of blokes out on ships to harpoon whales and drag them in, so we found other ways. I am sure those on that side sat there 20 years ago saying, 'Solar will never make it. Solar's ridiculous, rah, rah, rah.' In the 1980s it was \$10 a watt. Then it was a dollar a watt. Now we are talking cents a watt. I am sure Ms Sheena Watt will thoroughly agree with what I am saying there.

But those opposite cannot comprehend new technologies. They cannot comprehend the fact that computers on our mobile phones, in our pockets, were once the size of this entire room. Now we carry around incredible technology in our pockets and we can communicate anywhere in the world, do our banking, all these sorts of things. Technology is emerging at an incredibly rapid rate. This program is going to need to continually evolve, because evolution is something that humans do, Mr Davis and those over there. You might deny that, but we do. The technologies that are going to be important in

people's homes are going to have to evolve with this program – things like electric vehicles, which those opposite will laugh at, even though I know that some of them do drive them because they can see the economic benefits of it.

Back to solar PV – home owners see the benefit of it, the economic benefit, which is why one-in-three Victorians have solar on their roofs. They are going to get batteries. They are going to get bidirectional meters so that the 60 or 70 kilowatts under the hood of their car can feed into their home, can support the grid as we continue to electrify. But those over there – they do not want to look forward; they want to look backwards. They want to say, 'No, no, no.' They do not want to acknowledge the thousands of jobs that are associated with this program. They do not want to acknowledge the health benefits of getting cleaner air quality within homes. They do not want to do any of that. Mr Davis wants to go off on a tangent, say a whole lot of big words that no-one understands out of some reports that he has cherrypicked –

John Berger interjected.

Tom McINTOSH: he found. Another thing, I do not think Mr Davis's credentials on remembering dollars and numerical figures at important times mean he should be lashing out and criticising others in this place. I think he should be very, very mindful on that front.

While Mr Davis condemns and while the Liberal Party bring nothing to the table – no plan and policy – this minister has got on and delivered this program, which has been taken up by other states and is going to be critical as we go forward in saving consumers money. Ever-evolving technologies are coming into the home, and we are seeing it all the time – smarter technologies that enable people to consume energy when it is at its cheapest. I did a little bit of googling on the internet recently. Mr Davis has regularly this year referred to baseload power, because he just does not get the fact that baseload power is now irrelevant. We have got a couple of peak periods at either end of the day, and the rest of the day we are flooded with solar. We have got prices going into the negative.

David Davis: I've just referred to the solar.

Tom McINTOSH: No, you have been on the record talking about baseload power, because you do not get how our generation system works. You do not understand how it works, and again –

David Davis: I do, actually.

Tom McINTOSH: No, you do not, and you cherrypick information. The technologies we are going to put in place so that Victorians can access the cheapest electricity to power their homes and lead their lives are the next step and the next phase of this program. Mr Davis and his colleagues would be well advised to get out of the dark ages, to stop being in the mentality of harpooning blue whales and understand where technology is going and go with it and save Victorians money along the way.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:00): I rise to speak on this motion, motion 639, by Mr Davis. I have just listened to, I do not know, was it 10 or 15 minutes of gaslighting and deflection, where he talked about absolutely everything except the actual motion itself, because it is always a very good refuge, to go, 'Well, let's do some climate bashing of the Liberals.' All the motion is talking about is whether or not the scheme is being administered efficiently, and clearly – mathematically, obviously, by comparison and by any measurement – it is not.

Why is it that everything the government does has no financial discipline whatsoever? You talk about the benefits. But you know what? With everything you do the benefits get blown out. You say, 'You know what? The North East Link is a very good idea,' but then you blow it out by \$10 billion. And with the Suburban Rail Loop, when you said it was \$54 billion to do –

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, the member was just talking about relevance to the motion, and I do not think he is being relevant to the motion.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I will direct the member back to the motion.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Acting President. I will come back to the motion. But we are talking about value for money, and there are a number of projects around the state where we have been told, 'It will cost.' That obviously leaves the state worse off, and it will certainly leave the climate worse off, because we are not getting value for money in these schemes, especially compared to other states.

Why doesn't the government ever properly intervene on these cost blowouts when and as they materialise? Why don't they have the good governance structures in place so that they can actually intervene and amend them? What I notice in item (b) of the motion is:

the total cost impact of the Victorian program on industry and consumers likely to hit \$652 million in 2024, representing a 30 per cent increase over just 12 months and a rise from \$88 million a decade ago ...

Why do these things never get addressed in real time? If you run any sort of project or any sort of program or if you are in charge of any kind of budget, you would be getting governance reports at least monthly, maybe quarterly, to say, 'Here we are. Here's how we're tracking. This is how it's going. Do we need to tick it off?' But I imagine that these meetings must be very strange meetings where they go, 'Okay, well, we've delivered 10 fridges. Good – tick', 'Do you want to look at the finances?', 'No, don't worry about those' – because that seems to be the way this government handles financial responsibility.

And why does the government continue to develop schemes almost specifically designed to hammer the working class and the middle class? I note in here that the Victorian energy efficiency certificate has become the most expensive in the country at \$108 in October 2024, and I notice that the St Vincent report, as Mr Davis pointed out, refers to a number of equity issues around the share of cost impost in having these services. It does disproportionately affect the working class, the lower class, lower income families and the vulnerable. And why do we never have financial transparency? The costs of these schemes are buried within bills and not laid out cleanly and transparently. I note that today the Liberal and National parties made announcements about how we are committed to transparency, something that this government is allergic to.

Again, this motion is effective in just simply pointing out that there is no transparency, that the scheme is inequitable and being badly managed and that there are cost blowouts. None of these things the government ever seems to be able to address in real time. Why does it also seem to so often come back to the performance of the energy minister herself? Is there any project that she runs correctly, successfully, on budget, on time, to expectations and with consultation? I would love to see what a 360 review of her performance would be amongst stakeholders, peers, subordinates and others, because it would be very poor on this basis. I will leave my contribution there. I recommend this motion to the house.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (11:05): The Greens will not be supporting this motion. However, we wholeheartedly agree that there are significant problems with the Victorian energy upgrades scheme, and we have made those concerns known on many occasions. We believe that the concept is a very worthwhile one, but we want to see it strengthened rather than condemned or abandoned so that this actually makes a meaningful difference to emissions. As we have already heard, there is clear evidence of some operators gaming the VEU, in part due to the price of the Victorian energy efficiency certificates, so it is clear that the VEU has issues. The government got it wrong in regulating the rollout of the replacement of household appliances, like its fridges scheme in 2023. I have actually seen some of these fridges. I was out in Birchip in my electorate of Western Victoria visiting some community facilities that had had fridges just arrive that they never asked for, that they did not need and that they had no use for and that were sitting there.

Clearly there is an issue with many aspects of the scheme and it is of course important that these failures are properly scrutinised and fixed, but the concept of subsidising electrification and energy efficiency remains core to a swift energy transition that brings the community along with it. The Greens stand by this. We cannot allow private interests to get in the way of moving towards net zero.

The Greens have asked many times what role the SEC could play in support of consumer electrification and other interventions. Why can't energy-efficient products be provided to Victorians directly instead of via third parties that are motivated by profit and perverse incentives? When that happens, that is what we see with things like the dumping of fridges and some of the light bulb scandals and other things, which have all been very well aired.

What we want to ensure is that there is integrity in emissions reductions achieved through this scheme. We have had multiple reports of businesses doorknocking residents offering energy-efficient appliances and products such as door seals and low-flow showerheads but then simply leaving these products with home owners – not installing them, not ensuring that old appliances are removed, or installing them in such a way that they fail within a few weeks, like door seals peeling off shortly after installation. None of this is actually going to have any meaningful impact on emissions reductions.

We know that the government wants to ensure that energy efficiency savings recorded through the VEU system are real savings that actually reduce real emissions. But how are they doing this? We should be really setting up rules that require homes to be energy-efficient in the first place. The government has the levers that it needs to do that; it just has not decided to actually pull those. The Greens have had bills before this Parliament – we have had many of them; we have brought them forward time after time – to introduce mandatory energy efficiency standards, particularly for rental properties, and mandatory disclosure or standards for homes at the point of sale. We have seen governments refuse to adopt those bills, but they are sensible reforms that when we are looking at the scale of the climate challenge make a lot of sense. It is those sorts of things we need to be doing.

In terms of a scheme like the VEU, again we believe that this is a really important concept. We do not want to see the government walk away from a program like this. But we have a lot of sympathy for aspects of this motion in that it absolutely has to have integrity and at the moment it does not. We need to be able to have confidence in the measures that are being used, we need to have confidence in the oversight and governance of this scheme and we need to, most importantly, have confidence that it is actually reducing emissions, and there are serious questions about whether it is doing that. So while we will not be supporting this motion before us today, I would really urge the government to take on board the concerns that are being raised and consider how the VEU could play a more effective role in our emissions reduction efforts.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (11:09): I rise today to oppose the bad-faith motion from those opposite. It is once again a case of Mr Davis getting all his facts from newspapers, as he quoted in his contribution, and none of them from the abundance of expert advice, apart from – and I will acknowledge this – cherry-picking some parts of Mr Dufty's report. In fact I think it is worth saying that the Victorian energy upgrades (VEU) program is not simply a mechanism which will help us reach net zero by 2045, although it will contribute to us reducing our emissions by up to 33 per cent next year, by up to 50 per cent in 2030 and by up to 80 per cent in 2035 before finally reaching net zero emissions in 2045. It will not simply deliver renewable energy jobs for Victorian workers, although it is worth noting and celebrating that it is already supporting 2200 jobs across our state and our renewable energy transition will deliver 59,000 jobs by 2035.

The VEU is part of our plan to shore up our gas reserves, keep prices low and keep the lights on for future generations of Victorians. You see, by supporting Victorians to switch their household appliances to electric power we are taking pressure off our finite gas reserves by taking advantage of electric power, something I spoke to yesterday, which is increasingly generated from our renewable sources. We are keeping the lights on and delivering some of the lowest wholesale power prices in the country. Let us be very, very clear here: this is not just a scheme for Victorians who can afford the up-front costs of purchasing VEU products. When even a small number of Victorians purchase energy-efficient products through the VEU, the subsequent reduction in strain on the energy grid brings down everyone's household bills. The VEU, combined with our record investment in renewable energy, is the main reason that Victorians have the lowest wholesale price in the national electricity market.

The Liberals claim that energy costs have surged faster in Victoria than in any other state, but they could not be more wrong. Victorians on the Victorian default offer continue to pay less on average for their electricity than those on the Australian Energy Regulator's default market offer. Something I have spoken about before and will continue to highlight is the fact that between 2010 and 2020 the VEU program reduced wholesale electricity prices in our state on average by 2.2 per cent due to the reduced demand, and we will see even more impressive numbers in the next 12 months. Between 2021 and 2025 the VEU program will have allowed Victorians to avoid \$3.8 billion in energy system costs, with households set to save \$150 and businesses predicted to save \$870. That is worth celebrating, and do not just take our word for it: Victorians have seen the value of the scheme and they are engaging in the VEU in their millions. You see, since the introduction of the VEU back in 2009 more than 2.4 million households and 170,000 businesses have taken advantage of the program, reducing our state's emissions by an astounding 87.3 million tonnes.

This is how we know that Mr Davis could not be more out of touch. You see, constituents in his electorate have installed over 4000 VEU space heaters and hot-water heat pumps since the middle of last year, guaranteeing them savings on their electricity and energy bills. There have been over 500 electrification installations in Bayside, close to 1000 for both Glen Eira and Boroondara and a whopping 1400 for Monash. It is pumping out there in Monash.

John Berger interjected.

Sheena WATT: Today's motion certainly is not reflective of what the residents of the Southern Metropolitan Region want to see from their members, Mr Berger. Victorians know a good thing when they see it, and they voted with their feet. This motion is simply a time-wasting objection launched by a really noisy minority who cannot stand seeing working Victorians saving money and reducing their household emissions. This motion really is just the same old recycled lines that we have discussed time and time again in this place from a Liberal Party which has always had some strange, unexplained fixation with the VEU. Those opposite have always opposed the VEU for no other reason than an ideological objection to energy efficiency and electrification. They have tried time and time again, as we will recall, to undermine and even abolish the VEU, which does not make sense to the many thousands in the Southern Metropolitan Region who have taken advantage of this program. In fact when they were in government it was only because of their disunity as a party that they did not succeed in dismantling the VEU.

I am absolutely opposed to this motion, in part because I refuse to be lectured to by those opposite, who really have no plan for Victoria besides blocking progress towards renewable energy and emissions reduction goals, locking Victorians into some really unfair and high energy bills and effectively abolishing the 2200 jobs already generated by the VEU right here in this state. While they have been busy recycling the same old lines, they are continuing some really irrational hatred of the VEU, and they have been keeping it going for years – 15 years in fact. We are making sure that the VEU moves with the times because, like what was said by Mr McIntosh in his contribution, we are way beyond the times of lighting our lamps with blue whale, I have got to tell you. We know what responsible leadership and good governance look like. We are not wasting time. We are adapting, we are moving with the times and we are delivering. In fact in this year's budget we allocated \$5.9 million to conduct the strategic review of the VEU.

A member interjected.

Sheena WATT: Yes, that is right. We want to hear from experts, let me assure you, and not those opposite to understand how we can better strengthen the scheme to meet the financial challenges that households and businesses really are facing today. And we hear you. We have already started to see that Victorians are changing their expectations on energy upgrades. When we came to government we got straight to work by using the VEU to put Victorians to work in making some small upgrades in their homes, and we appreciate every single one of them that has done that. The evidence has now come in, and it is showing us that Victorians want assistance to equip their homes with larger

electrified appliances like space heaters and heat pumps. Once again, we are wasting no time. Over 500 different types of space heaters and 190 heat pumps are now eligible for VEU discounts. This will save working Victorians up to \$3600 in the case of space heaters and up to \$600 per year on their energy bills when they take advantage of the scheme.

Let me turn to another element of the motion that was raised by Mr Davis, and that is the price of Victorian energy efficiency certificates – VEECs – and the \$108 that was quoted. This is in fact an uncharacteristically high VEEC price. It is not the norm and trying to pass it off as such was a bad thing. VEECs have been trading higher than historically average recently, but prices had already begun to fall due to increased supply. We have increased supply by registering a range of new accredited providers and products with the VEU, and this has driven down consumer costs. In the last fortnight alone it is worth noting that VEEC prices have fallen by \$5, and if those opposite want to argue that \$5 here and there does not make a difference, then I suggest they get out and talk to some Victorian households, because, I tell you what, Victorians are feeling the pinch, and we are responding appropriately.

I will close today by challenging the remarks made by Mr Davis and of course by his colleague Mr Welch about Minister D'Ambrosio and the language that is used in this motion. I have got to tell you, without the Allan Labor government and the determined leadership of Minister D'Ambrosio we would not be where we are on the path to incredibly bold climate action. Victoria would not be where it is right now. We are enormously proud that we have legislated our targets in emissions and legislated net zero, and of course here we have now put measures in the constitution to defend and protect the SEC for future generations. While others might want to talk about waste and incompetence and exacerbated cost-of-living pressures, here on this side we are about getting on with it, serving the communities of Victoria and making sure that the VEU continues to be a part of that. Thank you very much for the opportunity to make a contribution today.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (11:19): I am very happy to support Mr Davis's motion 639, which:

- (1) notes the government's mismanagement of its Victorian energy upgrade program, which has seen:
 - (a) Victorians paying up to three times more for a tonne of carbon dioxide removed from the atmosphere under the state's program compared with other equivalent schemes in other Australian jurisdictions;
 - (b) the total cost impact of the Victorian program on industry and consumers likely to hit \$652 million in 2024, representing a 30 per cent increase over just 12 months and a rise from \$88 million a decade ago;
 - (c) the Victorian energy efficiency certificate – misnamed – become the most expensive in the country, at \$108.50 in October 2024;
 - (d) Victorian households pay \$188 per annum per household using 6000 kilowatt hours of electricity per annum in green scheme bill payments, non-transparently incorporated in the energy bills of Victorian consumers;
 - (e) the Victorian government deliver multiple refrigerators to the premises of individual small businesses as part of a roft;
 - (f) the Victorian scheme placed under review; and
- (2) condemns the Minister for Energy and Resources for her waste, incompetence and the additional load she has thoughtlessly placed on Victorian families during a cost-of-living crisis.

First of all, it is a real shock that a government program like this has been poorly run, isn't it. Mr Davis has talked about the fridge fiasco, and obviously we all remember those headlines. But embarrassing though it was, it is easy for Minister D'Ambrosio to attempt to dismiss these ludicrous scenes of fridges

piling up as outliers, unavoidable mistakes in the administration of any large scheme. The fact is, though, that even when the scheme did work it was a dud, like the fridges. A constituent wrote to me:

The fridge that was delivered to me in early March did not work. The invoice accompanying the fridge showed that the fridge had a value of \$3899 ... A similar fridge I could purchase from local suppliers for \$2200–2400, but it would be working and fully supported with warranty and back from the supplier.

Eventually, after much time and effort, my constituent got the fridge replaced. But the story did not end there. As he wrote:

This fridge is a Chinese manufactured second like the first one I received. The shelving is not level and drink bottles just fall over not to mention that the temperature is yet to reach the 3 degrees I have set it for ... the cabinet is out of square, leaving a gap in the doors.

Finally:

The problem now is, that I get no response, from the supplier or the manufacturer ... since the government stopped the program.

He concluded:

... why is the tax payer being rorted and paying for a program that has not been managed or made accountable for the supply of defective and second class over priced poorly manufactured fridges.

Nor was this an isolated issue. In one small community in my electorate businesses were inundated. In Queenscliff a restaurant owner I know well, Donnie Grigau, received multiple phone calls a day and actual visits from the scammers. He said:

I kept getting these phone calls from people pushing these fridges on me. I didn't want them, and don't need them, but the calls kept coming, and then the salesmen arrived at my restaurant door ...

Across the road at the Vue Grand Hotel, Kate Matherson could not stop the fridges arriving:

Box after box arrived at my hotel door. What to do with them? I've now had to go to the bother of having them collected ...

The fridges are not suitable for food-grade use and were only appropriate for drinks. To complete the farce, the fridges had to be on public display, all six or 10 of them – I ask you.

But it is not just that businesses got six fridges; they got six useless fridges. They were not even cold enough. They did not even work. Then to cap it all, the scammers who delivered the multiple fridges magically disappeared as they broke down. Businesses had to pay to have the junk fridges carted off and disposed of. What a waste – how environmentally wasteful is this. In what kind of world are we manufacturing cheap junk to meet environmental targets and then scrapping it right away? This is exactly what happens when you have tick-box schemes like this. It is the kind of mess you get with virtue-signalling schemes where the government use someone else's money – the poor taxpayer – to artificially intervene in a market with the sole purpose of winning votes in the green battle and to sound like they are solving a problem.

The fridges make the headlines and obviously that was symptomatic of Minister D'Ambrosio's failing system, but there is a much bigger underlying problem. Cancelling the fridge scheme was just window-dressing, addressing the symptom, not the cause. The program itself is the problem. The fridges might now be buried in landfill, but the cost persists every day. The cost of carbon abatement through the VEU program has escalated significantly. I looked at the spot prices today. They are still over \$100 each, adding \$200 to a typical home's annual energy bill. It is yet another hidden cost on energy bills. In the last few weeks I have repeatedly mentioned the \$256 million in land tax which the state government harvests from AusNet for transmission line easements, which has recouped every single cent of it from Victorian bill payers. It is the reason that Victorian electricity bills are three times higher than the actual cost of the electricity we are buying – three times higher, not 3 per cent or 30 per cent but more like 300 per cent. And this extra weight is not just environmental costs – at least that would be of some benefit. A significant amount is how poorly the scheme is administered.

With the VEU scheme, as with so many things, doing business costs more in Victoria. Victorian energy efficiency certificates are the most expensive carbon credits in Australia. By comparison, Australian carbon credit units, ACCUs, which also measure carbon savings per tonne, are priced at approximately \$36 per unit. New South Wales energy savings certificates currently trade at around \$30 per tonne mitigated, with the South Australian retailer energy productivity scheme, REPS, at a similar level. The scheme's total cost to industry and consumers is projected to reach \$652 million by 2024. A decade ago it was \$88 million. Where is this going to stop? At some point Victorian individuals and businesses will be completely broken.

The review announced by Labor is overdue, a recognition of failure, and as Mr Davis said, how could it possibly take two years? But even the review is costing \$5.9 million, and probably that will escalate too under your lot. You cannot do anything on time and on budget. I doubt you could even do a review on time and on budget. There is absolutely no end to the amount of money you will waste, no end to the incompetence of this minister and this government when it comes to energy. You are total failures, and you need to recognise it. But in any case, now we are going to have a review for two years. You can just see the excuses, can't you, Mr Limbrick: 'Well, we can't discuss that before the election because we're having a review.' No, you have to end this nonsense, and if you are going to do anything, do it efficiently and do it properly, and you do not need to take two years to work out how to do it.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (11:29): We know that the Liberals are opposed to renewable energy, we know that the Liberals are opposed to lowering our greenhouse gas emissions, we know that the Liberals are opposed to energy efficiency programs – that is true – and we know that the Liberals are opposed to the energy savings that households gain from the energy efficiency programs provided by Labor, because that is the effect of the motion that Mr Davis is moving today. That is the intent of the motion today. It is to oppose the way the Victorian energy upgrades program is being run in this state. He does not want households to get the benefits of more energy-efficient appliances, and he does not want households to get the benefits of lower power prices as a result.

They are opposed to action on climate change, and they are opposed to helping households lower their energy bills and end up with more in their pockets, off their energy prices, because the Liberals want the cost of running your home, of heating your home and of cooling your home to go up and up and up, whereas Labor, through the energy upgrades program, wants to help households lower their energy costs by providing more energy-efficient household appliances. That is exactly the intent of this motion, and that is exactly the intent of the agenda that sits behind what Mr Davis is promoting here today.

The Victorian energy upgrades program is a flagship energy efficiency program here in Victoria, and it has been a massive success, saving households and businesses thousands of dollars in reduced energy costs and helping our environment by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. What we see from the opposition, what we see from the Liberal Party in their continued attack on programs that support households to become more energy-efficient is a lack of concern for lowering greenhouse gas emissions and a lack of concern for households in the system. It is not the first time that they have been in the Parliament trying to get rid of this program. They have hated it since it began. They tried to abolish it years ago, and ever since there has been a relentless campaign of opposition from the Liberal Party to this program that is saving households money, because that is exactly what it has done. But it has also helped reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the state. In 2023 the Victorian energy upgrades program helped reduce Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions by 4.7 million tonnes – 4.7 million tonnes last year in greenhouse gas abatement.

The program has been running for a number of years. It has had multiple successes. As you would expect –

Bev McArthur: Such as?

Ryan BATCHELOR: I will come to the successes, Mrs McArthur. I am so glad you asked – I will get to that in just a minute.

As you would expect, when a program has been running over the course of many years, seeking to help Victorians reduce their energy costs – and it has been popular and successful – we have had waves of activity on household energy efficiency items that have been able to be improved. As that program has rolled out over its time, we have obviously dealt with much of the low-hanging fruit. In those circumstances it has been appropriate – it is appropriate – as responsible and prudent administrators of programs and managers of funds that we do administrative reviews of these programs, because that is what good governments should do. There are of course ways that every program can be improved. We accept that; we do not deny it. What we want to do is make this popular program even better, and that is the point of the review.

One of the things I want to point out and one of the things that I think is exceptionally important in the context of a debate about the Victorian energy upgrades program is what impact it is having on households. I am exceptionally proud that more than 4000 space heaters and hot-water pumps have been installed since the middle of last year in the Southern Metropolitan Region, saving thousands on energy bills. We had close to 1000 electrification upgrades under the VEU in Glen Eira and Boroondara last year, 1400 in Monash and more than 500 electrification installations in the City of Bayside.

I mention this in particular because it was in the City of Bayside, in the suburb of Hampton, that the Minister for Energy and Resources Lily D'Ambrosio and I went and visited one of these installations recently, and we met Bob and Pat, who had taken advantage of the Victorian energy upgrades program to convert their old, inefficient gas ducted heating system to a new electric heat pump, and they had taken advantage of the Victorian energy upgrades program to do that installation. Bob and Pat could not have been happier with the support that they had gotten from the program, with the way that the installers had operated, with the savings that they had achieved on the cost of the installation and with the ongoing savings that they were going to make every year from replacing their old, inefficient ducted gas heating system with a modern energy-efficient electric heat pump and better insulated ducting. They were rapt about the program; they could not have been happier. But it was not the first piece of electrification that Bob and Pat had done in their house. It was the next phase, because prior to this they had already made the decision on their own that they wanted to electrify their kitchen and so had removed their old gas cooktop and put in place a new induction cooktop. When we sat and asked Pat what it was like, Pat said in no uncertain terms that she absolutely loved it.

What this I hope demonstrates – this one example, one anecdote, just one, of a constituent of mine and a constituent of Mr Davis – is an example of the more than 500 in Bayside and more than 4000 across the Southern Metropolitan Region last year who are benefiting from the support that the Victorian energy upgrades program is providing in terms particularly of electrification of heating and hot-water services in Victorian homes: tangible benefits delivering real savings on costly items to people that we represent who want to do what is best for the environment and what is best to reduce greenhouse gases in our community. It is important to them – in Bob and Pat's case they are retirees on fixed incomes – that they are saving money when they do it.

That is what the Victorian energy upgrades program is all about: reducing energy consumption, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and saving households money. The Liberal Party may be opposed to each and every one of those three things. Labor supports energy efficiency. We support reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and we support helping Victorians lower the cost of the energy they use in their own homes and saving them money.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (11:39): This is yet another attempt from the Victorian Liberals to create an alternative reality where Victorians are losing out by getting cleaner and cheaper energy. Honestly, what a joke. The fact that Victoria has set the most ambitious emissions reduction target of any jurisdiction in Australia should be a point of pride. But those across from us have no

concept of what Victorians actually want. They have no vision for Victorians. All they have to offer is negativity and fearmongering. However, on this side of the chamber we are actually only concerned with getting on with one thing, and that is a better Victoria across all areas of life.

The Allan Labor government has made significant strides in our efforts to achieve this, and we will continue to vastly improve Victoria. This is because we are dedicated to achieving something for Victorians, a sentiment those across from me do not seem to be able to be worried about. From housing to health, the Liberals have no clue what we are talking about. They just say no. But you do not get outcomes with that attitude. It does nothing for Victorian people. After all, it is the Allan Labor government achieving the outcomes in cheaper energy, not John Pesutto's embattled Liberal Party.

The Victorian energy upgrades scheme has been a resounding success under the Allan Labor government's management and will continue to deliver cheaper and cleaner energy across the state. We as a state need to move forward and create futureproof living with energy efficient appliances. I am sure I do not have to explain the current consensus on climate change and its effects. This is one of the most pressing issues that we as a society face. Something must be done to address it. Without meaningful change the community will suffer. This is why in 2023 we made the Victorian energy upgrades scheme all electric. It is efforts like these that will set Victoria apart in coming years. Climate change certainly is not going away anytime soon, and the impacts are just going to get worse. Because of these basic facts, something needs to be done, and I am certain the Victorian people would rather a government that cares about their future than a government that only pretends when it is convenient.

As this motion is concerned with the financial reality of Victorian energy upgrades, it is important to acknowledge the financial reality of the climate crisis, so let us talk about that. Old appliances cost more. They cost more in the long run. Gas appliances are dangerous and much more expensive than electric appliances. Older appliances do not work like they used to, and they certainly cannot match the quality of newer appliances on the market. My colleague Mr Davis has mentioned the cost of energy upgrades but has conveniently neglected to include the expected savings. An upgraded heating system can save Victorian families up to \$600 a year and upgraded hot-water systems can save up to \$200 a year. That is not small change; this is hundreds of dollars a year for Victorian families.

Beyond the cost, what about the environmental impact? The Victorian energy upgrades scheme is expected to cause a reduction of 28 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. It is estimated that it is the equivalent of the greenhouse gas emissions made by 8.5 million cars a year. This scheme has essentially garnered the same result as removing nearly 9 million cars from the roads every year. If only it did something about the traffic as well. In all seriousness, these are goals that the Victorian government needs to strive towards. Climate change is a threat to everyone's way of life, certainly not least of all our proud agricultural workers, who the Liberals' coalition partners claim to represent. From parts of inner Melbourne like my community of Southern Metro to Victoria's food bowl, Gippsland and the Mallee, we will all suffer if nothing else gets done to address the emissions.

I am proud to be a member of a government that is continuing to fairly deliver for a better future for Victorians. The best part of all of this is that Victorians are set to have access to the energy upgrades scheme for longer. The current legislation that presides over the Victorian energy upgrades scheme will expire in 2030. Due to the scheme's ongoing success and the ongoing benefits it brings to Victoria, the Allan Labor government intends to extend this legislation to 2045. This means more time for Victorian families and businesses to upgrade appliances, more time to save money in the short term and in the long run. The fact of the matter is this scheme is working and it is helping Victorians.

This motion completely disregards the fact that this is a worthwhile expense and that it is already paying off for its participants. The motion completely disregards that this is good for Victorians. Further, this legislation to extend the energy upgrades scheme will also implement measures to lower the cost of Victorian energy efficiency certificates. This is in Mr Davis's motion, so I am sure he will be interested in hearing this. Victorian energy efficiency certificates will no longer be required to be created by 31 January of the previous year. As a result, this will drive down demand and therefore

drive prices down. Additionally, the government will be forming a review over the next two years to see how the Victorian energy upgrades scheme can be improved.

I hope this can put some of Mr Davis's concerns to rest. After all, the numbers overwhelmingly show that the Victorian energy upgrades scheme is a net benefit for Victorians. As for the statements regarding the Minister for Energy and Resources, the Liberals are simply spouting more unnecessary negativity and centralised talking points. The minister and the department have been prolific in delivering for Victorians. For example, without supporting infrastructure Victorians would not be able to look to a future with cheaper energy. These initiatives not only will make for a cleaner and cheaper energy market in Victoria but they will also deliver countless jobs across the state, especially in regional areas.

The opposition, I am sure, is quite confused by this prospect, as they seem to think it is the responsibility of the government to slash services and shut down facilities. That could be the only explanation as to why they are categorically against taking any steps to make a better Victoria. It is incredibly disappointing. What did their friend in the other place the member for Malvern do the second he became the Minister for Energy and Resources? He slashed every single emission reduction commitment made by the previous Labor government. What did we do when we came back into government in 2014? We got right back to work on bringing about a cleaner Victoria. We have worked tirelessly since to deliver that promise to the Victorian people. As for affordability of energy in Victoria, those across from me claim to care about it. Where was this sentiment when they cut the energy concessions by \$11 million? They are disingenuous about their concerns for the Victorian people and must resort to attacking ministers, who are generally concerned for the wellbeing of the Victorian public. They employ A-grade hypocrisy to score cheap points without any regard for the shambles they inevitably leave behind every time they gain office.

To paint a picture of the scope of what Mr Davis is actually attacking in this motion, I would like to discuss some of the other parts of the Allan Labor government's energy agenda that will drive cheaper, cleaner energy for Victoria. Just last month the Allan Labor government opened the first hydro-powered facility in Australia – the Hycel Technology Hub, running out of Deakin University in Warrnambool – which will set Victoria on the path to a cleaner future.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, this motion is very directly and clearly about the energy upgrades program. The member just indicated that he is about to talk about other programs which are not the subject of the motion. It is exactly what he said. He said, 'I'm going to talk about other programs.' Actually, this is about a different point.

The PRESIDENT: I think this debate, from what I have managed to take in, has been quite broad ranging as far as energy goes, so I will let Mr Berger continue.

John BERGER: Along with creating 200 jobs in regional Victoria –

Bev McArthur interjected.

John BERGER: In your area, Mrs McArthur. The hydro cell technology will expand our capacity to develop and ultimately implement hydrogen technology in the coming years. The hub will be co-located with South West TAFE, offering significant training opportunities for the future. The Hycel Technology Hub is important to the future of Victoria as it offers cheaper energy solutions in fields such as aviation and freight. It is one thing to transition home appliances and the like, it is another to transition our transportation industries. This will seriously put Victoria at the forefront of the future of emissions reduction technology, all thanks to the Allan Labor government's dedication to net neutrality.

We are also building solar up in the north, in Benalla and Wangaratta, with shovels in the ground as late as October. The northern regions are set to get a 250-megawatt solar farm capable of powering tens of thousands of homes, and of course the Golden Plains wind farm announced out in the west will

power nearly 1 million homes. This is all news from just last month. The Allan Labor government is building a cleaner Victoria and creating thousands of jobs in the process.

In hearing this motion I was curious about what the Liberals propose we do. I understand that they are somewhat embattled at the moment, but they offer no meaningful alternative for Victorians. Without advancements in technology Victorians will suffer. Programs for cleaner energy need to be implemented. The Victorian energy upgrades program is essential to the future of our state, and the perpetual naysaying does absolutely nothing for Victorian people.

In wrapping up my contribution to the discussion on this motion, I would just like to reiterate one thing: the Allan Labor government is delivering for Victorians. The Victorian energy upgrades program does more for Victorians in respect to not just climate action but jobs and financial support.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (11:49): I am happy to sum up. I could start with the statement ‘I disagree with the proposition in your motion,’ but that would be a massive understatement – massive. This motion is a complete conflation of the impacts of privatisation and the private market operation and a reform strategy – a complete conflation of two separate things altogether. Then it has drawn on what are quite reasonable numbers and completely made up a set of conclusions that match your ideological view of the world over there. This motion contains a completely distorted set of calculations. It is a fugly-wugly hotchpotch, really, of concepts, and I do not support in any way, shape or form the whole premise of this motion. In fact it is a complete mixture of ideological principles really tilted towards underpinning your dinosaur approach to fossil fuels and your obsession with the past. It just shows again, as referred to by my colleague Mr Berger earlier, how much of a muck-up game you would play with the transition to renewable energy should you get authority to do so. You would absolutely stuff it up completely – technical language. Once again Mr Davis feels the need to waste the house’s time making spurious attacks on climate and energy strategies. The Liberals continue to fight the same old tired climate change denialist points from 10 years ago. Absolutely nothing new – out from the old drawer, polish it up a bit, put a few new ideas around it.

Well, the world has moved on, and Victorians agree with us. More than 2 million households and 150,000 business premises have taken part since this program, which is the topic of this motion, began. Victorians have taken up rebates for 19,000 reverse-cycle air conditioners and 39,000 hot-water systems, contributing to a reduction of 28 million tonnes of emissions. Does that sound like mismanagement? Absolutely not. Victorians can see the value the scheme provides, and they are choosing to take part in the Victorian energy upgrades program and move away from polluting, expensive fossil fuels. Victorians are on board with this. As their devices age out in kitchens and businesses around the state, they are going for affordable, renewable installations. I just condemn utterly the concept of this motion.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (11:53): Well, we have been treated to one of the more bizarre contributions that we have seen for quite a while. She clearly did not have a clue what she was talking about. Let us just be very clear what this motion is about, noting that a number on the Labor backbench have been given the speaking notes and they have gone off on a frolic. This is not about whether you agree or disagree with climate change. This is not about whether there should be an efficiency energy upgrade program of some type in the state. This is about saying that the current program is being mismanaged by the current minister and that there is considerable waste and mismanagement in the program, and that is simply a statement of fact. It is actually a statement of fact. Nobody thinks that having the highest Victorian energy efficiency certificate figure in the country is a good idea. Nobody thinks that spending far more than you should spend to get equivalent abatement in other states is a good idea. Nobody thinks that the cost per household, at \$188 in Victoria, which is far more – go and look at Gavin Dufty’s figures on pages 17 and 18 of his report – than in other states –

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: Well, this is right. It is actually a very thoughtful report. It is a factual report. Nobody thinks that these high charges that are cross-subsidising an inefficient program are the way to go. People think: if you want an energy efficiency scheme, run it efficiently, and you will get more abatement for the impact and the cost. Whatever number you choose that you want for the scale of your program, you have to run it efficiently to get the maximum abatement. This is not actually a complex issue here.

The idea that the scheme is being placed under review and the government is going to extend it to 2045 without seeing the review – why does it take two years to do a review? And millions of dollars – we have heard \$2 million or more on the review. Why does it take two years and millions of dollars to do a review of a scheme that is being run inefficiently and that has the highest cost amount for schemes in Victoria and the highest rate for abatement around the country? Why would we not say, ‘Let’s get the house in order; let’s make sure the scheme runs efficiently and we can do more with it’? We heard a list of appliances that have been replaced. Well, if that is a good thing, why not more of that? If you run the scheme efficiently, why not more of that?

Actually, that is what the motion says, and it says the minister does not have an idea what she is doing and she has mismanaged the scheme – and she has. Those images should stick in people’s minds: six or eight fridges lined up out the front, delivered courtesy of Lily D’Ambrosio. Here you go – not just one fridge, two fridges, three fridges or four fridges but six fridges in some cases. Six fridges, and these, dare I say, goons who contributed to part of this actually seem to think that that is a good scheme. Well, I do not think it is a good scheme. I think it is a scheme that has been badly run, and it should be run properly.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (16): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, 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, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Water policy

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:03): (709) My question is for the Minister for Water. A fortnight ago a private citizen applied yet again for licences on the Rubicon River to support his proposed private hydro-electricity project. If successful, this would be the first private hydro project in an unregulated waterway in Victoria. The Taungurung Land and Waters Council have been fighting against these licence applications for years. They hold grave concerns for water and country if this project were to go ahead. As water minister, under the Water Act you have the power to step in and request that the Minister for Planning call this matter in or make a decision on this matter. Minister, will you step in and take responsibility for this licensing decision?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:04): Thank you very much for that question. I did not hear the beginning of the question around the waterway that you were referring to, but I have got Taungurung, so I am assuming it relates to the Rubicon hydro project.

Sarah Mansfield: Yes.

Harriet SHING: Excellent – thank you. As you would be aware, VCAT determined that the Goulburn–Murray Water organisation is required to make its decision in relation to the works licence and the take-and-use licence at the same time. That was the only issue that was identified in proceedings, and I have been advised that Goulburn–Murray Water is in fact already updating its processes in this regard. The application process has been going for over 10 years and so, as you have made the chamber aware that you are aware of, there have been a really intricate set of processes involved in that. There have been pages and pages of advice in relation to many parties, including the applicant, the CMA and consultants. Goulburn–Murray Water are the authorising, delegated authority for northern Victoria, including for the Rubicon, and they are best placed to assess all of the information as it relates to the process. They are my delegates, and they are required to assess the application according to their obligations as they are set out in the Water Act 1989 on any proposed works on waterways.

The VCAT determination as it related to the application from Taungurung included concern for, as you would be aware, riparian and aquatic ecosystems; Aboriginal cultural values and use of the waterway; riverine environment and biodiversity associated with the environment; maintenance of environmental water reserves; and proper management of the waterways. You would be aware also of what Taungurung raised when the matter was before VCAT, which I will not go through, given the time that we do not have available.

The VCAT process resulted in a determination that the application was a related application before GMW at the time that it made that decision, and it was required to defer that decision, as you are aware, until such time as the decision under section 67 had been made. It is my intention to continue to enable that process to be undertaken on the ground. Again, I have continued to take advice from Goulburn–Murray Water and also to engage with Taungurung in relation to these matters as they have become areas of legal contest. This will no doubt be something that needs to be worked through in a way that involves face-to-face conversations. I am very happy to update you as that work continues, because as I have said earlier and as you well appreciate, it is a really intricate process with many years of history and we do need to make sure that the relevant considerations under the act are part of any decisions that are taken that will affect take-and-use or the application and administration of a licence.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:07): I thank the minister for that response, and I will take it from that that you will continue to have Goulburn–Murray Water use their delegated authority and not use your authority to intervene in this matter. But the Water Act does not consider new uses of the waterways, so the guidelines for take-and-use licences do not really apply to this specific type of private hydro-electric proposal. I have been told that DEECA have promised a policy review to water authorities to assist them in making decisions about these sorts of matters, but that policy review has not yet happened. By ignoring this issue the department has I guess continued to contribute to the ongoing uncertainty that the Taungurung people are experiencing about this, so why hasn't DEECA done its job and created a policy regarding private hydro-electricity on unregulated systems, as promised?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:08): Thank you for that supplementary. As you have quite rightly indicated in that supplementary, DEECA is undertaking a review of policies and regulations as they apply to licences issued under both section 51 and section 67 of the Water Act. That licensing review project is proposing to establish new licensing regulations and updated guidelines, and that is intended to streamline the way in which existing arrangements operate and to increase clarity on what is expected of delegates in the exercise of their delegated decision-making authority. It is proposed that those new regulations will be prepared for commencement next year, 2025, with new guidelines to be published to support the introduction of those new regulations. The VCAT decision on sequencing of decisions on works licences and take-and-use will be included in these new guidelines, but they are also already being dealt with by Goulburn–Murray Water with the assistance of DEECA in that regard, if that provides you with some further detail.

Child protection

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:09): (710) My question is to the Minister for Children. Minister, in question time yesterday the Premier, when directly asked, failed to guarantee that there are no children in the family services system being prostituted. Minister, having had 24 hours to check, can you guarantee that there are no children in the family services system under your watch being prostituted?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:09): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. We have a number of times in this place discussed the work that our government is doing in relation to disrupting sexual exploitation of children in care, and I would note that when those opposite pose these questions or indeed give comments to the media they often imply that in many respects the workforce might be responsible for such sexual exploitation. They fail to understand that the sexual exploitation of vulnerable children who are in the out-of-home care system is by horrible, disgusting paedophiles out there in the community.

What we are doing as a government is investing in sexual exploitation disruption. As a consequence of the investments in our previous state budgets we now have across the state a network of sexual exploitation practice leads, ensuring that we are getting to children in care the services and the supports that they need so that these vulnerable children who are living in out-of-home care, who are under the care of the system, are not being preyed upon by disgusting individuals out there in the community who take their vulnerability and try to use it. What this government is doing is seeking to disrupt that kind of vile behaviour, which we all know, sadly, is out there.

It is the job of the child protection system to have the best interests of those children in care at heart at all times, and that is exactly what this government is doing with the investments that we are putting into the child protection system – as both the Premier and I said yesterday, more than \$4 billion over the last five years. What that investment equals is sexual exploitation practice leads right across our state. What that investment equals is investment in therapeutic care, making sure that every residential care home that has vulnerable children living in it is a therapeutic place by July next year. That is well over 85 per cent now and will be 100 per cent by July next year. We are putting the money in, we are taking the action and we are delivering the results that ensure that children in care get the services and the supports that they need to live safe, healthy, happy lives like every child should.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:12): Minister, thank you for your response, but given that you cannot guarantee that under your watch there are no children in the family services system being prostituted, will you immediately commission an investigation?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:12): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. Even the question itself highlights that those opposite do not understand the child protection system, nor do they understand the family services system.

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Or vulnerable children – that is right, Attorney. But the child protection system, the statutory system where there are children living in residential care, is very different to what is also our family services system. It is a part of it, but the family services system is one where we partner with community organisations right across the state to deliver services. The statutory services –

Members interjecting.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, President, I cannot hear myself, let alone respond to the question.

The PRESIDENT: I missed a lot of the answer too.

Georgie Crozier: I'm happy for her to start again.

The PRESIDENT: I think that should happen. Can we reset the clock to the minute, and can people desist interjecting so I can hear the minister's answer.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I was simply trying to explain the difference to those opposite between the child protection system and the family services system. They confuse the two. Nonetheless I can return to discussing the investment that our government is making in relation to disrupting sexual exploitation. As the Premier said yesterday and as I have repeatedly said in this place, children in care are amongst the most vulnerable and the most traumatised, and sadly and horrifically, people who are more vulnerable and more traumatised can sometimes be more easily preyed upon by disgusting individuals in our community. But what this government is doing is ensuring that we are investing in disrupting that type of behaviour. We know that it is working, and we know that the sexual exploitation practice leads which have been put in place as a result of the government's investment in disrupting this type of behaviour right across our state are having an effect and disrupting that kind of disgusting, disgusting behaviour. For those opposite to seek to politicise it is absolutely disgusting also.

Ministers statements: early childhood education

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:14): I rise to update the house on the 50 early learning childcare centres that the Allan Labor government is building across Victoria by 2032. Earlier this week I had the pleasure of announcing the six early learning childcare centres (ELCC) set to open in 2027, alongside the member for Kororoit in the other place. These six facilities will be located in Avoca, Cohuna, Foster, Mildura, Newborough and Nicholson and will provide over 500 places for children across Victoria when and where they are needed most.

Members interjecting.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I can hear the excitement is shared across the room as many members have advocated passionately for early education in their electorates, including member for Northern Victoria Mrs Tyrrell, who has advocated for the importance of early learning infrastructure in Cohuna, which will become home to an ELCC co-located with the Cohuna Consolidated School. Along with Cohuna, three other ELCCs will be located alongside local schools, which will support families to ditch the double drop-off and allow for children to have a smoother transition to school. Not only are many of these centres co-located on school sites, but most locations will provide space for other supports, including maternal and child health services and playgroups, because we know that services work better when they are together.

These centres highlight the strength of the children's portfolio as they bring together universal services of health and education to provide more targeted family services and supports. The fees for these services will be set at lower than average rate for each area to provide further support for low-income families, because this government believes that all families and all children should have equal access to high-quality early learning.

I would also like to remind everyone that the first four ELCCs that will be opening next year are in Sunshine, Eaglehawk North, Fawkner and Murtoa, and they are currently open for enrolments via the Early Learning Victoria website. We look forward to visiting these new centres once they are completed and hearing how they are able to positively contribute to their local communities as they begin operations.

Marine Search and Rescue

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:16): (711) My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. Marine Search and Rescue units across the state play an extremely important role in the safety of boaters around Victoria. Marine Search and Rescue crews are made up entirely of dedicated volunteers. Units are called upon to locate and provide emergency assistance to sinking vessels, vessels with mechanical problems and vessels that are run aground and to also provide search and rescue and

medical assistance if required. There are 27 units and over 900 volunteers in Victoria, with 13 units in the eastern region alone.

One such unit is Southern Peninsula Rescue, which is one of the busiest units. It has one of only two 10-metre vessels in the bay, which is now over 14 years old. The life span of these vessels is 15 years. My question to the minister is: as we come into another long, hot summer, can you update the house on Marine Search and Rescue's plan for this summer and future summers?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:17): I thank Mr Bourman for his question. This is a little bit of a precursor to my ministers statement today in relation to Marine Search and Rescue. It is a fantastic emergency services organisation. I am really grateful for the work that they do. There are around 800 to 900 volunteers around the state. As you have indicated, there are 27 units and 48 response vessels, and they are responsible for safety in offshore and inland waterways. Last week I announced VESEP grants were going to 10 MSAR units, so \$350,000 for equipment and facility upgrades. Southern Peninsula was the one you mentioned, yes?

Jeff Bourman: Yes.

Jaclyn SYMES: The rescue squad will be receiving two Suzuki motors and two tech Dolphin motors.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: We have a passionate local member here, visiting MSAR. We are also investing in MSAR through the Valuing Volunteers program and also the mental health and wellbeing program.

The fleet replacement program list is put together by industry experts. I do not pretend to know everything about the boats that are required, but the advice I receive is that they are replaced based on risk and operational need. Vessels are constantly monitored by the MSAR office to meet stringent national requirements. Inspections and condition assessments are conducted for vessels that are over the age of 15 but they are not necessarily retired at the age of 15, and units are supported to obtain equipment they need via MSAR vessel replacement.

I would also note, Mr Bourman, that I am aware of MSAR's future needs and in active discussions with the Minister for Outdoor Recreation to explore opportunities for perhaps some collaboration and sustainable funding ideas.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:19): I thank the minister for her answer. My supplementary is a little cheeky. Southern Peninsula Rescue do have a 14-year-old vessel, which can only be used for 15 years. Currently funding is insufficient to replace the vessel. My question is: will the minister make a priority budget bid to have the vessel replaced before it is sidelined and the rescue capability compromised?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:19): Thank you, Mr Bourman. I do believe that I addressed many of the points in your supplementary in my answer to your substantive, but thank you for raising it with me. I am very happy to speak directly with the brigade in relation to their budget issues. As well, I am sure you would be happy to put in a budget bid yourself.

Child protection

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:20): (712) My question is to the Minister for Children. An 18-month-old girl died last month. Her protection case had been raised with the department on several occasions and with your office, including in May this year. An order was made that this child and her twin sibling spend weekends unsupervised with their mother despite several documented incidents and despite repeated pleas from their grandmother to have the order reviewed because of her grave fears for the children's safety. Minister, how is it that this critical case, with compelling evidence and an urgent call to action, lands in your office but is not immediately triaged and acted upon?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:21): I thank Ms Bath for her question. At the outset can I say that the death of any child in any circumstance is obviously tragic, and I of course send my condolences and acknowledge the impact on families and those who love and know and work with a child who may have passed. Can I, though, also say that in this place I do not comment on individual cases. It is not appropriate for me to go into the specifics of any case or to hypothesise about the specifics of any case. When a child who is known to child protection does pass, the appropriate actions are taken by the department and the cause of death is assessed by the coroner. It is not appropriate that those matters be canvassed in this place.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:22): Minister, thank you for your response. This is devastating for the grandmother, who I have spoken with on this issue. This is a failure of child protection and the system that you are responsible for, which has cost a little girl her life. What will you do to ensure that the sibling is safe and not subjected to the same conditions as her sister, which tragically cost the sister her life?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:22): I again thank Ms Bath for her question and acknowledge that these are indeed tragic circumstances by Ms Bath’s descriptions. As I said, cause of death is a matter for the coroner, and I will not discuss individual child protection matters in this place or in the media. It is appropriate that the department and the coroner are allowed to go through the appropriate processes without politics being made of such tragic circumstances.

Members interjecting.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, I understand that this is an incredibly tragic case that has been brought to the chamber by Ms Bath, but one of the issues here is it seems from what the minister is saying that it is not possible for the chamber to inquire into and to seek explanation about the minister’s actual role. I am sorry, President, but this is actually a serious, important matter. If we cannot ask about a minister’s actual role in this tragic case, there is something very wrong.

Georgie Crozier: Further to the point of order, President, this is obviously a deeply tragic case and there are circumstances which the minister cannot go to. But in relation to the failures in the system, Ms Bath has spoken to the grandmother concerned, and she wanted it directly raised with the minister in the Parliament.

The PRESIDENT: This is just debating. That is not a point of order. The requirement under standing orders as far as answering questions goes is that if a minister is responsive and answers a question as she deems appropriate, she has answered it. An answer to a question can be, ‘I cannot answer that question because of certain reasons.’ That is an answer to a question. That is the way it has been determined this term, so I do not uphold the point of order.

Ministers statements: Green Links grants

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:25): I rise today in my capacity as the Minister for Water, and the exciting news keeps coming in the water portfolio. Last week I was really happy to officially announce the \$2 million round 2 of the Green Links grant fund. This is a statewide funding round and it is part of our \$10 million Green Links program. I joined the hardworking member for Ashwood in the other place Matt Fregon – he is a staunch advocate for his local waterways – down by Scotchmans Creek. This is a part of the world that has seen around 8000 plants put in in and around the waterway to make sure that we see that vegetation work contributing to healthier, more drought resilient and more connected waterways. This is because of the work of the Friends of Scotchmans Creek and Valley Reserve, including in partnership with councils, to get this outcome underway.

So many members in this chamber and the other place will be excited to hear about round 2 of the Green Links fund. That is open from now until 5 December for project funding between \$20,000 and

\$350,000 for eligible community and environment groups, schools, traditional owner groups, local governments and land or water management agencies. It has been extended to all urban waterways across Victoria. Just like the Pick My Park announcement, which the Premier was delighted to announce earlier this week, it is all about providing Victorians with healthy green space closer to our growing communities to connect people with local environments and make sure that we have community and social licence as part of ensuring that our communities can grow and grow well. The Green Links program complements the \$262 million in investment committed in the 2024–25 budget, and I know that everyone here will join me in making sure that communities have every opportunity to see the investment that will complement our work across our landmark housing statement and reform initiatives.

Housing

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:27): (713) My question is for the minister representing the Treasurer. I was recently contacted by a member of the public who alerted me to a case where the first home owner grant had been applied for by a person but they were later found by the State Revenue Office not to have complied with the residence requirement as they were renting out the house. They were investigated, action was taken through VCAT and the \$10,000 was recovered, along with a \$1000 fine. However, it would appear that the costs of enforcement of the residence requirement would have far outweighed the funds recovered. Is there any analysis of whether enforcement of this requirement stacks up financially?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:28): I was diligently writing all that down and then I just got to the end and went, ‘I’m going to pass that on to the Treasurer for his response.’

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:28): I thank the Attorney for passing that on to the Treasurer. My supplementary is: considering that a person can only claim the first home owner grant once and the point of it is to help someone buy a home, does it really matter if they are claiming it for themselves to live in or someone else to live in as a landlord? Removing the requirement to live in a first home purchase may also encourage more rental stock onto the market. Would the Treasurer consider removing the requirement to live in a house to claim the first home owner grant?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:28): I thank Mr Limbrick for his supplementary question, which takes the form of a suggestion, and I am sure that the Treasurer will be happy to respond, including with all of the initiatives that have a similar objective to the one that you have just promoted.

Child protection

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:29): (714) My question is for the Minister for Children. Last year’s commissioner for children and young people’s annual report found that premature case closure, poor information gathering, poor access to services and an undermanned system were contributing to the deaths of vulnerable children. Have these issues in the child protection system been fixed?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:29): Thank you, Ms Lovell, for your question. At the outset can I thank the commissioner for children and young people for the important work that she does and in particular the recommendations of a number of her inquiries and of course as always her annual report.

Thank you, Ms Lovell, for again giving me the opportunity to talk about the important reforms that we are making in the child protection system. This is ongoing work, but as I have said time and again in this place, and which I am pleased to again remind the house, in the last five years we have invested more than \$4 billion in reforming the child protection system, as compared to when those opposite were working on the government benches and the Auditor-General found that the system was

underfunded and operating beyond its capacity. Since that time, since we took over the situation that the Auditor-General so damningly recorded, we have invested more than \$4 billion. As part of that investment, as I was explaining earlier in relation to Ms Crozier's question, we have sought to ensure that every residential care place, for example, is a therapeutic place. Maybe those opposite do not understand what this means – Dr Bach did. Gee, I miss Dr Bach. Dr Bach was a great partner in this work because he did not play politics with it. He was interested in real outcomes for children. The therapeutic supports in every place in residential care mean that we are wrapping services around 100 per cent of kids in residential care, as compared to when the system was operating beyond its capacity when those opposite were in power.

We have invested \$151 million in the family preservation and reunification response program. In family conferencing we are putting families first, making sure that around every child in the system there is a discussion with them, with those who love them and those who work with them about what might be in the best interests of each and every child who is in the child protection system. We are putting \$34 million into integrated and intensive family services. We have tripled funding in the family services system since our government came to power, making sure that children in care get the supports that they need. There is \$128 million to support and maintain the critical functions in the child protection system. There is support for carers of children in care, including the carer support help desk for foster carers and kinship carers. We have invested \$548 million around those therapeutic supports.

In answer to Ms Crozier's question earlier I was pleased to talk about the investment we are making in disrupting paedophiles who might prey on the vulnerable kids in the child protection system. We have installed right across the board – and I might admit that Ms Wooldridge knew that this was a problem. When those opposite were working in Ms Wooldridge's team, including Dr Bach himself, the headline was 'Paedophile gangs preying on vulnerable children in Victoria, says minister'. Well, it was our government that sought to reform this space – *(Time expired)*

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:32): I take it that the minister has not fixed that. You have had 10 years in government, and every problem in the child protection system belongs to you. The commissioner for young people report that I referred to in my substantive question also found that of 45 child deaths the commissioner reviewed, each child had an average of four reports to child protection and the child was living in a dangerous situation. Have you as minister ordered a review of your department's procedures so that at-risk children are removed from their dangerous environments earlier?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:33): I thank Ms Lovell again for her question. Can I say in relation to children in the care system that decisions around each and every individual child's care are made by the care team around them who have the best interests of the child in mind. There are obviously key performance indicators around intakes, reports and how long it is before a child is seen at each of the different stages within the system. I can have the department provide you with a briefing about that works if it is something that you do not understand over there, but at its core the child protection system is working to ensure that the best interest of every child is –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I cannot hear the minister.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, President. I cannot hear myself. At its core the child protection system is working in a way that ensures that each and every child as an individual child has their needs assessed to ensure that the care plan that is put around that child is in that child's best interests. That will be different for each and every child.

Ministers statements: mental health services

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:34): I rise to update the house today on their work underway by the Allan Labor government to upgrade our mental health facilities across the state. Recently I was really pleased to announce the completion of a number of significant projects funded through our \$60 million Mental Health Capital Renewal Fund, including a more than \$1 million refurbishment and upgrade of nine community mental health residential units at Peninsula Health. There is \$750,000 for the Maroondah Hospital to improve their outdoor spaces in their inpatient unit, and I have also just recently announced the next 11 health services that have been granted funding in the latest round, including \$1 million for Austin Health to renovate eight ensuites and \$994,000 for Northern Health to refurbish the mental health inpatient unit. And that is not all that we are doing. I was recently pleased to announce seven health services who are recipients of more than \$33 million of community mental health expansion program investment. As part of this significant investment Western Health will receive \$6 million to redevelop its Harvester clinic in Sunshine and Goulburn Valley Health will receive more than \$4 million to provide updated facilities with increased capacity for community mental health services.

We are getting on with the job of upgrading and investing in mental health facilities right across the state, all as part of our ongoing commitment to rebuilding Victoria’s mental health system and backed by more than \$6 billion of investment. The Allan Labor government is ensuring all Victorians will receive the mental health support they need in the high-quality modernised facilities that they all deserve.

First Nations child protection

David ETTERSHPANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:36): (715) My question is for Minister Blandthorn. The Yoorrook Justice Commission made a series of recommendations to urgently reform Victoria’s child protection system to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. Recommendation 12 recommends that an Aboriginal legal service be notified when the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing receives a substantiated report in relation to an Aboriginal child or unborn child. This ensures that parents are offered appropriate legal support. However, First Nations parents are increasingly being forced by the department to enter so-called voluntary agreements to place their children in out-of-home care and not to involve lawyers on the basis that this would complicate matters. This avoids any scrutiny and leaves parents vulnerable to having their children removed from their care for indefinite periods without independent court oversight. So I ask the minister: consistent with the Yoorrook recommendation, will the government establish a notification system to ensure Aboriginal legal services are informed of the department’s receipt of a report relating to an Aboriginal child or unborn child?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:37): I thank Mr Ettershank for his question and indeed for his advocacy and the constructive way in which he seeks to work with the government on matters relating to the protection of children in care. Before I go specifically to recommendations 11 and 12 I just want to call out the element in your preamble, Mr Ettershank, that went to the assertion that the department might be in any way forcing non-voluntary agreements. That would be a very serious concern that I know I and I am sure the department would be horrified about. If there are examples of such, I would request that they be provided to us outside the chamber for investigation. Certainly it would be the view of the department that any agreements are voluntary and that in making voluntary agreements everyone’s fundamental rights to any representation would be critical. But certainly only the court can force agreements, and again in such circumstances representation is a critical element of that. So if there are any suggestions that something to the contrary has happened, the department I am sure would gratefully receive those.

In relation to *Yoorrook for Justice* recommendations 11 and 12, these recommendations go to the process for supporting pregnant women with an Aboriginal child, including through consent-based child protection notification schemes. The government committed to supporting both of those

recommendations in principle, and work is underway to consider how we further progress that work. It is ongoing, and in relation to progressing the scope of recommendations 11 and 12, unborn reports are the initial priority in that. We are really keen to do that immediate work. The first step is to confirm the scope and what a pilot might look like for a holistic child protection notification scheme for unborn reports. To that end DFFH has commenced this policy scoping work in partnership with Aboriginal legal services, Aboriginal community controlled organisations delivering children and family services, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and of course the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Department of Health as well.

The aim of a pilot for a new response model would be of course to provide that holistic and intensive support, those wraparound services, including legal advice when and where it is needed, for women who are pregnant with an Aboriginal child. It is intended that this new response model would increase engagement with all of those wraparound services by mothers pregnant with Aboriginal children, with a view to reducing the number of unborn reports which lead to further intervention by child protection. Indeed I would call out that some of the examples of where this has happened really well already have been at some of the ACCOs. Bendigo would be a really good example of where they are leading this work and the outcomes are truly impressive.

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:41): In 2014 the former Liberal government amended the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 to reduce the amount of time children spend in out-of-home care to 12 or 24 months before they are permanently removed from their family. This responded to concerns about children being moved between multiple out-of-home arrangements over an extended period. However, poverty, social marginalisation and the long waitlist for culturally appropriate support mean that many Aboriginal people struggle to meet the strict time limits for family reunification. Recommendation 25 of the Yoorrook Justice Commission was that the act be amended to allow the Children’s Court of Victoria discretion to extend the timeframe of a family reunification order if it benefits the child, which the government again supported in principle. I ask: will the minister amend the Children, Youth and Families Act to undo the continuing damage caused by the one-size-fits-all approach of the current time-limited family reunification orders?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:42): Thank you, Mr Ettershank, for your supplementary question. Indeed I acknowledge that there has been a lot of interest in this matter. Certainly given that the then government of the day introduced this bill in 2014 and I was subsequently elected in 2014, this is a matter that has exercised me since that time because I completely agree with where you are coming from. My speech on the subsequent bill in 2015 shows that, as does my evidence at the Yoorrook Justice Commission, where I committed to reviewing this legislation and in particular what equates to a blunt provision and a hard deadline, if you like, for family reunification and the negative impact that it can have particularly on mothers but on all parents when we do not provide families with enough time to get the supports and the services that they need to have a successful reunification of their family. I committed at Yoorrook to look into this. It is something that we have conducted a consultation on since that time and continue to work on.

Court Services Victoria

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:43): (716) My question is to the Attorney-General. Attorney, with funding cuts of over \$20 million to Court Services Victoria in this year’s budget, we are already seeing courts having to make some savage cuts to services. Recently it was revealed that the Children’s Court at Ringwood, Sunshine, Werribee, Heidelberg and Frankston will all be closed, forcing victims of youth crime, witnesses and young alleged offenders to travel much further to attend court. With youth crime at a 14-year high under this Labor government, how does inflicting further pain on victims of crime by making them travel even further to attend court improve access to justice?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:44): I thank Mr McGowan for his question, but there is some misinformation in the way he has

characterised the proposal to streamline some Children’s Court matters. This is something that is being worked on as a result of justice partners coming together to discuss initiatives to tackle youth crime, so that involved Mr Erdogan’s portfolio, Mr Carbines’s portfolio and my portfolio bringing people together to come up with immediate initiatives that could continue to support the amazing work of the youth justice legislation. One of the suggestions there was from the courts, in conjunction with consultation with police, to bring about some streamlined efforts. It is part of the courts’ centralisation and focus on youth crime. It is about ensuring that the correct court is chosen for the individual child.

The way you have characterised it is if a child is from Ringwood but they actually commit a crime in Sunshine, they are required to go to the Sunshine court at the moment. Under the changes, they would be required to go to the closest court, which would mean that individual children more often than not would be able to be supported to return to the same court rather than different courts across the state. That is going to ensure that you can understand the underlying causes of the crime so that you can form a view of what the best interventions are from a youth justice perspective and from a criminal justice response and indeed be informed by more regular police. At the moment you are getting different individuals that have different views and less contact with the child. Very regularly the police informant is not somebody who was involved in the charging of the child. We are trying to bring everyone together so that there is more attention on the individual child and so that we understand how to best respond to that child’s offending behaviour. This is not about disenfranchising victims. This is not about funding cuts. This is about responding to the community concerns of youth justice.

I am more than happy to give you a more in-depth briefing. I know you raised an adjournment matter last night, and I have started to prepare an answer because there is a lot in it. I am concerned with the way you have characterised your questions, the way you are speaking to the community, because it is not about funding cuts. This is an initiative designed to bring about a better outcome. One of the things that we announced as part of the youth justice package also was dedicated magistrates that are going to be specialised Children’s Court magistrates. At the moment in the Magistrates Court in Melbourne they literally put their magistrate’s hat on, and then 5 minutes later they might be doing a Children’s Court matter and they become a Children’s Court magistrate. That means that you get no familiarity, no streamlining, and there is a lack of consistency – (*Time expired*)

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:47): Can I thank the minister for her response and her answer in respect to my initial question. Attorney, as you know, as a result of the Allan Labor government’s budget cuts there will not be a single Children’s Court operating in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne following the closure of Ringwood and Heidelberg. This service cut has been condemned by Oonah Aboriginal health CEO Amanda Hand, who has said:

... we expect the impact of the closure of the Ringwood Children’s Court to have an immediate impact ...

Attorney, you are also the Leader of the Government in this chamber. If you cannot protect your own portfolio from consequences of your government’s financial mismanagement, what excuse can you offer the people of the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, who have had their last local Children’s Court taken away?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:48): It is just not true, the way you have characterised it. In fact we have funded an additional magistrate into the Children’s Court system. There is additional funding going into the Children’s Court system. We are consolidating the lists. We will have Dandenong still operating. It is that list, and it is about bringing about better outcomes. I am more than happy to take you through how this is going to be a better approach to tackling youth crime.

Ministers statements: emergency services

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:49): I gave a little bit of a taster on what I was going to be talking about today to Mr Bourman, and I am delighted to continue on this topic of –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Can you reset the clock? Thanks; you are already ahead of me.

Jaclyn SYMES: I am delighted to continue on the topic of VESEP grants after Mr Bourman's question earlier and delighted to update the house on how \$15 million of volunteer emergency services equipment program – VESEP – grants are supporting 268 initiatives, brigades, units and flotillas across the state. I was in eastern Victoria with the Drouin fire brigade last week to announce that we are delivering –

A member interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: they are so lovely – tankers, trailers, chainsaws, boats, snowmobiles, minor facility upgrades and a couple of big fills to local brigades as well. We know that the ongoing threat of bushfires to Victoria is real. That is why the CFA will receive more than \$11 million to fund 179 initiatives, including a new command vehicle, which the Drouin brigade were very happy to hear about; new light tankers for the Wollert, Corinella, Echuca Village, Ellerslie, Greendale and Kingston brigades; and ultralight tankers for another 15 brigades across the state.

Our VICSES volunteers, as we all know, do an amazing job, working tirelessly in responding to tens of thousands of requests for assistance this year. That is why 28 units will be supported with more than \$2.5 million to deliver replacement vehicles, facility upgrades and trailers. Ms Lovell, I am sure you will be interested because Mick is delighted that our investment includes \$129,000 for Shepparton Search and Rescue to receive a new heavy rescue truck. Forty Life Saving Victoria clubs are sharing in almost \$880,000 to make sure they have what they need to respond during the summer season, and Ms Watt will soon be making some announcements in relation to the opening of the lifesaving season. The Marine Search and Rescue flotillas, as we referred to earlier, will receive over \$350,000 to keep the coast and waterways safe, including the Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad, which Mr Bourman is an advocate for.

Victoria's emergency services volunteers do go above and beyond to protect their community. That is why I am proud to be delivering millions into the emergency services organisations to make sure they have the latest equipment to do what they do best.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:51): Minister Symes will get for Mr Limbrick answers from the Treasurer on his substantive and supplementary questions.

Constituency questions

Eastern Victoria Region

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (12:51): (1193) My question is to the Treasurer in the other place. The Mornington Peninsula hosts up to 5000 Airbnb properties, which is having a major impact on housing availability and affordability for local families. How is the Victorian government supporting families on the Mornington Peninsula to have access to affordable housing, including rentals? Australia is currently experiencing a major housing shortage, which is why the Allan Labor government has introduced ambitious housing reforms to ensure more Victorian families can find a home where they want to live. We have released the housing statement, streamlined planning applications and are introducing the short-stay levy to encourage the return of properties to the long-term rental market and fund more social and affordable housing. But while we are getting things done, John Pesutto's Liberals are trying to make it harder for Victorians to find a home, yet again caving to special interests by committing to scrapping the short-stay levy. While the Allan Labor government is working to increase housing supply for my constituents in Eastern Victoria, John Pesutto's Liberals are doing everything they can to make it harder for Victorians to find a home.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:52): (1194) My constituency question is to the Minister for Police, and my question is about crime in the Northern Metro Region. My community is suffering from a crime crisis under this decade-old Labor government. The latest crime data shows motor vehicle theft is up nearly a third in the City of Hume with more than two cars stolen every day, and criminal incidents overall are up more than 12 per cent. As we are planning for more growth, community safety becomes even more important. Over 600 people have signed my open letter calling on the government to do the right thing and build a police station in the Mickleham, Kalkallo and Donnybrook area, and last weekend I held a crime forum in Mickleham with my friend the Shadow Minister for Police Brad Battin to, valuably, hear from locals firsthand about their concerns about community safety. I ask the minister: what is he going to do about the crime crisis, and when will he be getting on and committing to the police station my community in the north so desperately needs?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:53): (1195) My question is to the Minister for Housing. Last week I spent time speaking with public housing residents in South Yarra. The majority of residents I spoke to are frustrated, nervous and confused about Labor's plan to demolish and privatise public housing. Many love their homes and would rather not move. One resident I spoke with, a former engineer, said that his home seems quite solid, pointing out that even after earthquakes in recent years there are not even plaster cracks in the tower block flats, unlike many other homes across Melbourne. He does not see the requirement for these buildings to be demolished rather than refurbished. Minister, why don't you put on the public record the engineering reports that underpin your claim that demolition rather than refurbishment is required across all 44 public housing towers in Melbourne?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:54): (1196) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. How is the government investing in community emergency services facilities in Bayside? Well, you can see why. More and more people want the opportunity to call our Bayside communities home, and one of the things that make these communities so special is the beaches. We want these beaches to be safe for the current residents, for the future residents and for all visitors, and we are extremely proud of the investments that the government has made in new lifesaving clubs in Bayside. The brand new Brighton Life Saving Club pavilion was recently opened at Dendy Street Beach, led by the Bayside council – a \$19 million refurbishment, including a state government contribution. We opened recently the new lifesaving club at Black Rock, again partly funded by the state government, with new facilities. There is new equipment going into all these clubs, including new rescue boats, new vehicles, new waterproof jackets and new binoculars, making these beaches safer for all the people who want to visit, including all the residents.

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:55): (1197) My question is to the Minister for Police on behalf of residents who are very concerned about increasing crime and cars being stolen in Bendigo and surrounding areas. I spoke with a lady whose family was asleep at home when their house was broken into and their car stolen. She said that detectives are beyond frustrated as teens go to court, are let off and are back on the streets within 24 hours, stealing again. Every day cars are being stolen, and police do not have the resources to keep up. Some offenders are just 14 years of age and drive at high speeds. Their reckless behaviour is putting others at risk. If a car is found, it is often damaged beyond repair. This week I saw burnout tyre marks on a main residential street in Flora Hill right in front of people's homes. The Stolen Cars Melbourne Facebook page has over 83,000 followers, with countless posts about cars and trailers being stolen, including another vehicle stolen from Kangaroo Flat station. The Labor government weakened bail laws in March this year, and with over 1000 vacancies in

Victoria Police and police from regional areas being called to assist with rising protests in Melbourne, what is the state government doing to address this issue?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:57): (1198) My question is for the Minister for Planning and Minister for the Suburbs. I am delighted to hear that the Allan Labor government has announced the next tranche of \$150 million of growth areas infrastructure contribution funding towards public transport projects in our growing suburbs. I note that the south-east has already benefited from multiple routes which were announced earlier this year, including the 831 on Bells Road, the 798 on Hardys Road and indeed the 928 as well in the Beaconsfield–Officer area.

It is great to see that this government continues to invest in our outer suburbs. It does not, like those opposite, like Mr Newbury, just say, ‘They can all live in the outer suburbs’ – never mind any plan for it, never mind actually outlining to the Victorian people what your plan is for housing, just not in his backyard, let the other suburbs deal with it, with no actual plan. This is a government that supports Victorians’ right to live in the inner city or the outer suburbs in great electorates such as mine and is delivering those resources. Minister, how will this new fund benefit my constituents?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:58): (1199) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. My constituent is a Chelsea resident and volunteers with a community group who dedicate their spare time to advocating for accessible local amenities. One such amenity is Chelsea train station. While the level crossing removal has improved traffic flow, pedestrian access from the station’s entrance to Chelsea’s retail precinct is now hampered by metal barriers. Commuters exiting the station must now walk 700 metres to the nearest crossing. For some this might be a minor inconvenience, but for many elderly residents and those with physical disabilities this has created a major accessibility issue. Current ABS data suggests that nearly one-third of Chelsea residents are aged over 55, with 32 per cent of residents suffering one or more chronic health conditions. Such a large cohort of our community should not be an afterthought. My constituent asks: will the minister ensure the installation of a pedestrian crossing at the main entrance to Chelsea station?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:59): (1200) My question is for the Minister for Planning and Minister for the Suburbs, and it follows the release of the coalition’s plan for financial integrity. Minister, the plan released today commits to an intergenerational report which will in part be used for driving investment in infrastructure, services and new industry. The Eastern Victoria Region is home to some of the fastest growing parts in Victoria, including the Mornington Peninsula, Casey and Cardinia, yet these areas are being short-changed by the government when it comes to investments in health, public transport, schools, community safety and support services to address drug use and homelessness. At the same time, the government is driving up the cost-of-living crisis and destroying many of the industries that those communities have relied on. So, minister, will you commit to an intergenerational report to inform your decisions about the real needs of the growing suburbs of my region rather than blindly supporting the \$216 billion going to a single project which will burden the next generation with record debt?

Sitting suspended 1:01 pm until 2:01 pm.

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (14:01): (1201) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and is regarding the Leakes Road off ramp at the Western Freeway. Could the minister please update my constituents on when the signalling and lighting issue at the Leakes Road off ramp will be resolved? It has been nine months since the matter was raised by the council with the Department of Transport and Planning. The Leakes Road off ramp does not have appropriate

functioning traffic signals or sufficient lighting due to rampant copper wire theft. This has resulted in a widespread issue, with traffic piling up on the freeway, creating dangerous situations for all Western Freeway users. Residents are currently petitioning for the intersection to be fixed. My constituents want to know when the Allan Labor government will stop neglecting the west by delaying and cancelling major projects. Could the minister please provide an update on when this intersection will be fixed?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (14:02): (1202) My constituency question is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs; I did not expect her to be in here. As the community in the Northern Metropolitan Region celebrates Diwali, I would like to wish everyone a joyful Festival of Light. Diwali is more than a cultural event, it is a time for renewal and reflection and a joy to those celebrating. It is a moment when families and communities come together lighting lamps to signify the triumph of light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance and hope over despair. In the Northern Metropolitan Region we are fortunate to have a vibrant and diverse community. Diwali can remind us to light up our communities with warmth and a spirit of unity and inclusivity. Minister, how is the Allan Labor government supporting our Northern Metropolitan multicultural communities to celebrate significant cultural events like Diwali?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:03): (1203) My question for the Minister for Health concerns maternity services at Camperdown Hospital. A huge local protest followed the service's shock closure in August. After a hastily announced review, it was resumed five weeks later. At that time I asked if South West Healthcare's emphasis on the very small number of low-risk births was a deliberate effort to downplay the significance and viability of the service. Since then the unit has frequently been placed on bypass. Was announcing the return to birthing but demanding impossible standards just a cynical way to cancel services by making them impossible to deliver? Staff have been treated abominably and have to reassure expectant mothers, who must be beside themselves not knowing if their birth plan hospital will be on bypass at any given time. Minister, what will you do to replace the GP obstetrician and GP anaesthetist who have now resigned?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:04): (1204) My question is for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Many of my constituents living near the \$26 billion North East Link Project have expressed deep concern about the dust and dirt arising from those building works and from the removal of tunnelling soils et cetera. Likewise, my constituents who live around the Suburban Rail Loop construction site are concerned about the planning for the commencement of tunnelling, rightly so as we can already see the preliminary planning and phasing causing significant disruptions in my community for drivers, businesses, families and homes. My question for the minister is: will you clarify where the trucks exiting the sites will exit from, where they will marshal for loading, how many trucks per day will operate and how many hours per day will they operate, and can you detail where the debris and dirt from the tunnelling site at Box Hill Gardens will be dumped?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:05): (1205) My constituency question is for the Minister for Police in the other place. Sadly, what I ask the minister is this very simple question: when will the PSOs return to Ringwood East train station? The government say that Ringwood East train station is open. Let us not forget they have spent close to a billion dollars on two level crossing removals and a new station, and for months and months there have been no PSOs at Ringwood East train station. There is a hub; that hub is empty. This is all happening at precisely the time we are having a crime crisis and we are having unprecedented rates of aggravated burglaries occurring in Ringwood East. To think for a moment that there is no correlation between the two would be a foolish assumption.

It is absolutely critical that PSOs are returned to Ringwood East train station with great haste. They should never have been removed. There should have been a temporary allocation during the construction period, and it simply has not happened. Minister, when will they be back?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:06): (1206) My question is to the Minister for Housing. Minister, on any given night WAYSS Dandenong has about 35 families, including 80 children, in crisis accommodation in hotels. With the national housing and homelessness plan prepared by the City of Casey in October 2023 showing that Casey has the third-highest number of children aged zero to 9 who accessed specialist homelessness services in 21 and 22 Victorian local government areas, can you please explain what is being done to address this crisis? The manager at WAYSS, which is a crisis accommodation place, shows how real problem is, saying:

Before now, we could put case management around these families and find longer-term rental accommodation. That's now becoming ... more difficult ...

The capacity for us to assist is diminishing.

I ask: Minister, what is being done to address this appalling situation, which is unacceptable in a country like ours? I would like to know what the current statistics are of homeless children in my area that are accessing accommodation, please.

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (14:07): (1207) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Can the minister explain why the Melba Highway and the Midland Highway from Tatura to Shepparton have been dropped from the government's road maintenance list? The minister recently made a rushed announcement that the government was finally going to spend the road maintenance money allocated in the 2024–25 state budget and start road repair works. The Melba Highway, in my electorate, was top of the RACV's list of worst roads in Victoria, so I was excited to hear Minister Horne promise on television that the Melba Highway would be repaired. Imagine my disappointment when I looked at the Department of Transport and Planning's website and saw that the Melba Highway was not on the list of roads to be repaired. The Midland Highway from Tatura to Shepparton was in the top 20 worst roads in the RACV report, and it was on the list for repair that the government provided to the media, but that road section is also now missing from the maintenance schedule on the department's website.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:09): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 498, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Housing

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (14:09): I move:

That this house acknowledges:

- (1) the release of OFFICE's report, *Retain, Repair, Reinvest: Flemington Estate – Feasibility Study and Alternative Design Proposal*;
- (2) that this report outlines a feasible alternative to the government's current plan to demolish and privatise the high-rise public housing estate at the site of 120 Racecourse Road, Flemington;
- (3) the repair, retain, reinvest approach outlined in the report could achieve a complete refurbishment of all homes, match the number of total dwellings proposed by the government's plan, increase the net number

of public homes, avoid the displacement of the estate's residents and save the government \$364 million in costs at one site alone;

- (4) that the government has refused to provide any public evidence or justification in over 12 months about why Victoria's 44 high-rise public housing estates need to be demolished;

and calls on the Labor government to consider OFFICE's report and thoroughly consider all refurbishment and renovation options prior to any decisions about demolition and make the findings public.

I am pleased to speak to this motion, moved by the Greens, calling for the government to consider OFFICE's report and thoroughly consider all refurbishment and renovation options prior to any decisions about the demolition of the public housing towers across Victoria and make these findings public. OFFICE are a highly reputable, not-for-profit, design and research practice who have released a report outlining the feasibility of refurbishing 120 Racecourse Road in Flemington. They worked with experts in the field, including architects, engineers, surveyors, urban designers and researchers, to undertake this feasibility study. As this motion notes, this report outlines a feasible alternative to the government's current plans to demolish and privatise high-rise public housing estates, including the one at 120 Racecourse Road, Flemington. It notes that the retain, repair, reinvest approach outlined in the report could achieve a complete refurbishment of all homes, match the number of total dwellings proposed by the government's plan, increase the net number of public homes, avoid the displacement of the estate's residents and save the government \$364 million in costs at one site alone.

The report further notes that the government has refused to provide any public evidence or justification in over 12 months about why Victoria's 44 high-rise public housing estates need to be demolished. OFFICE found that refurbishing this housing estate and building more public housing not only is feasible but would help keep residents in their communities and save the state \$364 million when compared to the government's plans to demolish and privatise these estates. Across hundreds of pages OFFICE meticulously details how these towers can in fact be refurbished and brought up to contemporary standards. Some of the features of this refurbishment include double-glazed windows, new heating and cooling systems, balconies, solar panels, renovated kitchens and bathrooms, increased accessibility and improved community spaces. Retrofitting also means significantly lower carbon emissions compared to the demolition and redevelopment. All of this is possible at a lower cost than the government's current plan while still building just as many extra homes and keeping these sites for public housing. This groundbreaking report refutes every one of the government's claims to date that they have used to justify their unconscionable plans to demolish public housing in the midst of a housing crisis. It looks at structural reinforcement to protect against seismic risk. It offers solutions for full modernisation, open balcony space, energy efficiency and sustainability. But perhaps most remarkably it has been able to offer this alternative while keeping the welfare and rights of public housing residents at the centre of every consideration.

Housing is a human right. Public housing is the answer to the housing crisis. It is the policy intervention good governments use when faced with housing shortfalls. Even the once great Labor Party built public housing, but not anymore. These neoliberals trashing the Labor Party brand are now intent on retreating fully from public housing in Victoria. You have transferred thousands of homes, you have demolished hundreds, soon to be thousands, and you are handing public housing land to private developers. This is called privatisation.

Labor have, shamefully, tried to discredit OFFICE because they have no other way of defending their plans for redevelopment and privatisation of Victoria's 44 public housing estates, but OFFICE are not alone in pointing out the enormous flaws in Labor's plans. Other experts across the field have also come out against the government's plan. Another group has recently released a report about the feasibility of refurbishing Fitzroy's Atherton Gardens public housing estate. The University of Melbourne School of Design architecture group even had a whole set of assessments dedicated to helping students learn about the feasibility and benefits of retrofitting Victoria's public housing estates. Across the globe there are countless examples of similar housing estates being retrofitted up to modern standards. These projects are often lauded for their financial and environmental efficiency while at the

same time allowing residents to stay connected to their communities. America, Scotland, France, England and Canada – the list goes on. Let us hope it includes Australia very soon.

When the human rights of residents and common sense win out over property developer interests, governments turn to the retrofitting option because it is plainly the better one. The once great Labor Party, however, has been captured by neoliberal interests and will stop at nothing until every element of our public services has been privatised. To date Labor have not produced a shred of evidence to show that they undertook any feasibility studies before making this disastrous decision to demolish all of Victoria's high-rise public housing estates, and they continue to refuse to justify their decision. But OFFICE's report cuts across Labor's lies. If Labor are not lying about their decision-making process, why won't they release any of the supposed feasibility studies they undertook? Why do they continue to hide these documents from the public despite countless requests in Parliament, through the FOI process and even in the courts? It is becoming clearer with every passing day that the Labor Party does not have any evidence to justify these privatisation plans. Instead the government only thought about getting out of the responsibility of providing public housing and handing over public land to private developers so they can turn enormous profits at the expense of everyday Victorians.

Labor keep parroting the same lines about how the estates are not fit for habitation or that refurbishment is not possible, but this is just one more instance of Labor trying to rewrite the narrative to give them cover from retreating from public housing. The truth is Labor have been running these towers into the ground for years and emptying them slowly, apparently so they can sell them off to developers.

According to the Productivity Commission, Victorian Labor has spent the least per capita of any state in the country on the maintenance of public housing, and we have the highest vacancy rate of public housing in the nation too. These figures do not lie; the government has been driving residents out. The *Age* reported in May this year:

Victoria has thousands of vacant public housing dwellings and continues to have the worst occupancy rate in the nation ...

The proportion of public housing dwellings occupied across the state as of June 30, 2023, was 93.7 per cent, according to the Commonwealth's mid-year report on government services.

The Council to Homeless Persons stated in January this year:

The Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services, released today, reveals public and community housing residents make up just 2.8 per cent of Victoria's households.

This is the lowest percentage in Australia, which has a national average of 4.1 per cent.

As this Labor government attempt to erase public housing and public housing residents from our state, in fact they have recently started to refer to public housing residents as 'renters' in their official departmental communication. It is a naked attempt to diminish the status of residents and to assert their power as the landlord – and might I add the Victorian Labor government is in the running for being the worst landlord in Victoria. We see what Labor are doing: they are trying to dehumanise residents so they are easier to evict and so that they can erase public housing from our language and our policy solutions altogether. This is the language of capitalism. The language of profit making has seeped into the way the government talk about the people they serve. What starts with objectifying and commodifying language ends with objectified and commodified treatment.

I implore the once great Labor Party to return to their roots as a party that serves the people, not corporate interests, and builds rather than destroys public housing. As a first step the Labor government can start with actually reading OFFICE's feasibility study, not treating it with contempt and dismissing and minimising it, and considering all refurbishment and renovation options prior to making any decisions about demolition.

I would like to further add that over the past few weeks and months we have seen this Labor government try to minimise genuine community feedback and opposition to their plans. They have

tried to minimise genuine attempts to consult the community and hear directly about how residents are feeling about this plan. We have been at the estates week in, week out, wanting to offer support to residents, and I can tell you firsthand about the devastating stories we are hearing from residents. Residents are telling us they are being harassed by Homes Victoria with persistent, often menacing phone calls pressuring them to leave, and some are threatened with legal action. Most often they are unaware of what is contained in the documentation they feel so pressured to sign. Not enough interpreters, if any at times, are being offered so that residents can adequately understand the documentation in front of them. Just yesterday I raised in this chamber that at Richmond residents are reporting that they are only being shown one page of the documentation, feeling pressure to sign and not being given access and proper time to consider the rest of the documentation in the contract. We have heard from residents who are telling us Homes Victoria are giving them only one option, of community housing with rent that they cannot afford, and they are being told that Homes Victoria are not giving them any other alternatives. What are these public housing residents supposed to do? Do they accept a house that they cannot afford the rent for, or do they go homeless? Because that is what Homes Victoria and Labor are currently offering public housing residents.

Even the former housing minister in the Labor Party a number of years ago recognised the immorality of putting residents in that position. Then housing minister Wynne, after considerable community pressure and outcry from residents, made a commitment that no public housing resident could be worse off and forced to pay rents higher than what they were paying, especially if they could not afford it. He guaranteed public housing conditions, and I implore this Minister for Housing at the very least to do the same. To not do the same is to consign thousands of public housing residents to community housing with rents they cannot afford or face homelessness. Residents are telling us they are being told if they do not accept the measly offerings offered by Homes Victoria, they will be given no other housing options and they will be taken off the public housing register. That is how Labor is treating public housing residents in this state right now – with absolute contempt.

That contempt is then brought into the chamber when the minister and others on the backbench have the gall to say that genuine consultation is somehow misinformation. Well, name the misinformation. What we are doing is much more than Labor has done in the 12 months since announcing this disastrous plan and imposing it on residents. We are actually furnishing residents with information about their rights and what they can ask for. The information we provide to residents is that they can ask for an interpreter if they cannot understand the documents in front of them. If that is misinformation, this Labor government does not deserve to govern. But that is what is happening right now. If you want to look at the privatisation of this Labor government, look no further than what it plans for public housing in this state. You cannot claim to be a government that is thinking about affordability and the future of housing in Victoria for all Victorians when you are about to, in the face of the worst housing crisis we have experienced in decades – with over 120,000 people on the state's housing list, with 30,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night – announce a plan that demolishes the homes of 10,000 people with a plan to gift two-thirds of the land to private developers.

We know this is going to happen because they have done it before. They created this template about 10 years ago with the so-called public housing renewal program (PHRP), which then morphed into the ground lease model. I know we have heard Labor MPs decry that there is no privatisation, but if you take a public housing estate that is fully publicly owned, you demolish the homes, you replace some community housing on about a third of the estate and the rest of the land is given to private developers for private housing, that is called privatisation. If you look at what former Premier Andrews announced last year, he announced that exact template, which they have already tried at the lower rise estates.

They announced that 10,000 residents at these estates would become 30,000 residents, so two-thirds are going to be private, one-third are going to be community – no public housing at those estates. The only exception is the Carlton towers. Let us talk about what is happening at Carlton. The Carlton privatisation project in fact started many years before the PHRP, if not one of the first templates for

privatisation. When Labor got away with that, they thought, ‘What else can we get away with across this state?’ You just have to go across the Carlton estate to understand how that estate has been steadily eroded by private development, some community housing and all that was remaining were the two red-brick towers that Labor had systematically moved residents out of over a number of months and years. It was inevitable that those towers were being earmarked for demolition and the land further privatised until –

A member interjected.

Samantha RATNAM: You are right. I just heard a call from Labor that the Greens are helping to negotiate extra billions of dollars for public housing across this country, and I credit my federal colleagues Max Chandler-Mather and Adam Bandt –

Harriet Shing: On a point of order, Acting President, the outgoing member has indicated something that is fundamentally not true. ‘The Greens cannot take credit for this’ is what we were saying, so I would suggest that confected delight in this is misplaced.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): It is not a point of order.

Samantha RATNAM: Save it for your contribution. It was inevitable that the full privatisation was about to be complete at Carlton. I had watched that estate being steadily eroded over many, many years and watched aghast as all the community amenity was taken away from those residents and the residents were taken away from that estate. The Prime Minister and the former Premier stood upon those towers on the day before making the announcement about the rest of the towers across Victoria and announced the red brick towers would come down and would be replaced by buildings funded by this new funding that had been boosted by the Greens negotiations. After significant pressure over weeks when the community said that rebuild must be public housing, we managed to eke out of the government a response through an article in the media. They did not even have the gall to come and announce it or make any separate press release. After significant pressure and the media saying to the government, ‘Will it be public housing? You’re about to take these first towers down,’ finally the government relented after pressure, thanks to the extra funding boost that the Greens secured, to rebuild those houses as public housing.

So we take those two and we look at what is going to happen at the remaining 42. The remaining 42 estates have not a single commitment from this Labor government to rebuild a single public home. It is only community housing that is being offered. Not a single public statement or confirmation from this government can allude to any public housing being rebuilt at this estate. No resident is being told they can come back to public housing. Yes, they are told they might be able to return in six to eight or 10 years, when the refurbishment is complete, but not one of them is being promised that they can return to public housing.

Can I end with this, the words of residents who have told us they do not want to be shifted into outsourced community housing and they do not want their estates privatised. They do not want to be torn away from communities that they have built bonds and ties with over many years – for many of them, the first communities they got to know after arriving in Australia as refugees and asylum seekers. They do not want to be torn away from their schools, they do not want to be torn away from their health services, they do not want to be torn away from their transport options and they do not want to be torn away from each other. And we do not want you to tear them away from us, but that is what Labor is currently proposing to do.

These residents are telling us firsthand, and if Labor had the courage to actually speak to residents and go down to those estates like we have, week in, week out, they would hear directly from them the devastation in their voices, in their eyes and in their hearts when they say, ‘We don’t want to be moved out of public housing. We need to stay in public housing.’ Because do you know what public housing means to them? It is their safety, and it is their lifeline. It is their escape from homelessness. It is fixed housing costs for tenure that is guaranteed. They do not have to worry about being turfed out, pushed

out or forced out. They do not have to worry about their lives falling apart, and that is what residents are terrified about right now – about what happens to their lives when they are moved to community or other housing. They are already hearing horror stories of residents who have been moved out only to be told a year or two later they have to move again because there is some sort of commercial arrangement the government has got into about their house. We have so-called affordable housing that has been offered to many residents over many years who are only told five or 10 years later that, sorry, the agreement always was that this housing returns to market housing after a period of time. These residents are saying, ‘I built my life here. I didn’t know that after 10 years the government was going to give it back to the private market.’ That is what is being offered right now. That is what is proposed at the Kangan TAFE site that the government wants to redevelop. That is public land. They are offering a paltry 10 per cent affordable housing with a fixed time limit of 10 years until they can give it back to the private market.

This is privatisation writ large by this Victorian Labor government, the once great Labor Party. We are urging them to listen to residents, keep communities together, stop this mass privatisation and sell-off of public housing land, stop the demolitions and, as a starting point, just consider the alternative evidence. There are so many people right now who are pleading with you just to look at the evidence and consider it deeply before you make this disastrous decision and devastate thousands of lives.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:28): I rise to make a contribution on motion 628 in Dr Ratnam’s name, which calls on the house to do a number of things. It is always a pleasure to stand in this chamber and talk about what we are actually doing when it comes to housing, because we are doing a lot, despite the contribution that the Greens might make. I have had the benefit of listening to the contribution of the Greens just earlier, and it is really quite sad to hear some of that contribution, which is clearly wrong, inaccurate and designed to manipulate vulnerable communities, with no care or thought for those communities whatsoever. It is really interesting that those who profess to advocate for better housing for our most vulnerable and in-need Victorians are actually doing the opposite. I am going to take great delight in going to a lot of detail about what the government is actually doing, despite what the Greens are saying that we are doing. There is a whole world of difference. I might just point out, and I owe a debt of thanks to Minister Shing for pointing this out as I was listening to the contribution, that there was a slight change to the Greens’ motion, I believe.

A member interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Yes, well, it is a slight change, but it has a significant effect. It is almost like you would not notice it if it were not actually pointed out. The motion calls on the house to acknowledge the release of OFFICE’s report and then it talks about the report, which they say outlines a feasible alternative to the government’s current plan on housing with regard to 120 Racecourse Road, Flemington. It calls on us to acknowledge the retain, repair, reinvest approach outlined in the OFFICE report, and then it says:

... the Government has refused to provide any public evidence or justification in over 12 months about why ... 44 high-rise public housing estates need to be demolished ...

Well, we have. That is kind of hilarious. But it is the changes in the last bit. The original version of the motion that the Greens proposed to move called on the Labor government to heed the advice of OFFICE’s report to stop the demolition and privatisation of Victoria’s public housing towers, but the new words just call on us to:

... consider all refurbishment and renovation options prior to any decisions ...

So they walked away. The contribution that was just made heavily focused on – and again, this is completely untrue – privatisation, demolition, displacing residents and all that kind of rubbish. But to get a deal with those opposite, the Liberals, they have decided to change their wording so that they could water it down and just call for ‘refurbishment and renovation options’. The best disinfectant is sunlight, and the Greens deserve to be really pilloried for their absolutely disgraceful conduct when it

comes to our most vulnerable Victorians, who look to government to have safe, secure housing provided for them and housing that is modern and fit for purpose.

Our government has done a lot of work looking at and getting expert reports and advice about the state of the towers. I myself have gone to the Homes Victoria website to look at the state of the towers, and there is lots of expert evidence. I know this was something that Minister Shing talked about yesterday. Unfortunately, because Dr Ratnam refuses to take up the offer of a briefing she does not know these sorts of things, but that suits their narrative, because they are not interested in learning about the facts. All they want to do is keep using this issue to manipulate people. It is actually very tragic and sad. But what we are about over here is providing housing that is modern and fit for purpose. We know the difference. What we want to do is make sure that people have the housing that they need and deserve.

I am going to take a little bit of time to dispel some of the lies, misinformation and myths that are peddled by the Greens. Let us talk about the high-rise development plan for a moment. The high-rise development plan will triple the number of people who call these sites home. It will take capacity from 10,000 to 30,000 people in popular Melbourne suburbs we know Victorians want to live in. People should have a right to choose where they live. Unfortunately, if you look at the Greens' inner-city goats cheese curtain, you have got to be pretty wealthy and drive an EV to get in there. What we want to do is make sure that people can have homes that they want to live in and that are where they need to live and that they do not have to be a wealthy inner-city elite to actually live in them. So we will also increase housing for vulnerable Victorians, and that includes not-for-profit community housing and public housing, across the sites by 10 per cent.

Now, the problem with the report that the Greens seek to rely on – again, it is a dud proposal. Like with everything, they just say it is not feasible and it is not based in fact. But the thing is, this is what happens when you are a minor political party; you can say whatever you like and not have to face scrutiny for it. So they just make stuff up. We only have to look to the recent Queensland election, where the Greens got an absolute thumping because people have worked out how embarrassing they are and the complete rubbish and rhetoric that get peddled by the Greens. They got a thumping. We are actually looking at what is happening in the council elections, and we are seeing that the Greens are getting a thumping in the council elections as well because people have worked it out.

Members interjecting.

Sonja TERPSTRA: What millennials want is housing, and we are working to increase affordable housing. But on the public housing front what we know is that the cost of refurbishment in the Greens' dud proposal is not properly quantified and is underestimated to suit the Greens' NIMBY-like approach to the redevelopment of housing in Melbourne. I mean, we just hear their contributions: 'It's oh so easy. If only Labor would listen, because Labor are so silly they need to be lectured to because they're just so inept.' But, again, the Greens will never have the opportunity to stump up.

You can just imagine what would happen if the Greens were in charge. It would be an absolute debacle. Again, the Greens say, 'Oh, it's so easy to structurally retrofit the homes of thousands of Victorians while not relocating them.' I do not know how that would work. How do you embark upon major renovations of anyone's home, particularly if you have got a bathroom that is outdated, if the plumbing is broken and it has got to the point where you need to replace the plumbing so you do not have running water? How do you have a shower? You have got that. Then if you have got to replace the kitchen, how do you replace the kitchen? If you have got no kitchen, you need to have alternatives to be able to cook. These are completely delusional proposals. They are not grounded in reality.

Their report proposes \$560,000 to upgrade lifts. The lifts would also be used for trades to work on upgrades, and it is not possible to live in towers while the lifts are out of use. If you have a disability, you rely on lifts to get up and down. What are you meant to do? Again, they do not address that point. They just want to lecture the government with these stupid platitudes which bear no relationship to reality. They clearly have not spent a lot of time with people who live in these towers, because they

do not know what their needs are. We know what their needs are. That is why it has been worked out that these people need access to lifts to get up and down and in and out of their homes. If you take the lifts out of action to fix them, that might take a long period of time, so what do you do with people? Do you just leave them up in their houses? That is why the approach the Greens are taking is completely delusional. There is that issue. There are structural deficiencies in the report. It proposes significant invasive structural penetration that is not able to be done safely with residents in place.

The other thing that the Greens' proposal also did not address is this. Their proposal would be non-compliant with fire resistance level ratings between apartments, the size of lifts to allow for ambulance stretchers, waste chute sizes, distances from apartment entries to fire stairs, the provision of hobless showers, the width of communal corridors to allow for wheelchairs passing and floor-to-ceiling heights. Those things are lost on the Greens. It is the detail that they do not understand. They just want to make it so easy to be dismissive. Again, it is the detail that they are not across, and it shows in the way that they prosecute this issue. What they are about is manipulating vulnerable communities, and they should be absolutely condemned for it.

Since November 2020 more than 15,500 homes have been completed or are underway as part of our capital programs, including the Big Housing Build, the Regional Housing Fund, our ground lease model, the public housing renewal program and the Social Housing Growth Fund. This includes more than 10,000 homes which have been completed or are underway as part of the Big Housing Build and more than 5000 households have either moved or are getting ready to move into their brand new homes.

I have only got a minute left on the clock. I know Mr Batchelor will go to a lot of these issues as well, because this is a good opportunity to stand in this chamber and talk about the things we are doing that are grounded in facts and not disinformation and lies. I know Mr Batchelor will also go to many things that are happening in his electorate. Our state budget in 2024–25 invested \$216 million extra in the housing portfolio. You can see that our government is getting on with investing and making sure Victorians who are vulnerable have the housing that they need and deserve to live in, which is modern and contemporary, up to modern standards and is safe, and that there are wraparound supports for people who need them when they need them. I will conclude my contribution there.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:38): I rise to speak on Dr Ratnam's motion. I think it is an okay motion that we are not going to oppose. It is something we have spoken about, and I thank the member for her willingness to reach out to the opposition in quite a constructive way. I understand the Minister for Housing has also reached out to the Shadow Minister for Housing, possibly in an unconstructive way.

It is important to be transparent about these things, and what we are asking for is transparency. I just want to start off with that in our four years in government whenever there was even the slightest peep or review or public service movement regarding public housing, we would hear a big tremor – basically an earthquake – from that side yelling at us for decisions not even made. You would have Martin Foley on that side – remember him? – literally talking about privatisation and running a scare campaign saying the Liberals wanted to privatise public housing in St Kilda. We remember that. Could you imagine if the Liberal Party in government were to put out a plan with as little transparency as the Labor government's? Could you imagine not providing documents that we have requested to the opposition? And could you imagine what the Labor Party would do in opposition? There would be protests, from the union movement as well, as far as the eye could see all the way down Bourke Street. There would be CFMEU green bans. There would be an absolute tremor from that side yelling at us. But this is the thing: the government have not been transparent, and conversations could be had if the government were to consider releasing the OFFICE report and being transparent about what they are doing, because let me be clear, no budgets or plans have been made public on the government's plan for the 44-tower redevelopment. The government should be transparent about what they are doing.

I know many in the community are watching what is going on in the Supreme Court at the moment, and I think the Premier ought to apologise to the lead plaintiff Barry Berih and the 479 families. For

some people, maybe not others, it does seem a bit disparaging to describe them all and paint them all as Greens. Some people would take more offence to that than others, but clearly not all 479 of these families are Greens supporters. I know this because I have met them. I speak to them, and I have been down at Flemington a couple of times and met many families, many public housing residents. I know I and my colleagues interact very well with the Somali community down there. In fact I was at the Somali day celebrations down there. I think Dr Ratnam may have been there as well. Not one Labor MP responded to their invitation – isn't that interesting – because they knew what the conversations were going to be about. There was not even one Labor councillor – they RSVP'd but did not turn up. It was very interesting because those Labor MPs, particularly the Labor MPs for the Northern Metropolitan Region – they wanted them there to celebrate Somali day – knew every second person they chatted to would be speaking about what was happening, how poor the consultation was and how many families were concerned about having to move very far away.

I think it is important that we have a level of transparency about this. Again, there have been no budgets and no plans made public. These families have been tarred by the Premier as Greens, and they are not. They are people with families that want to go about their everyday life, and it is a really concerning time for them – concerning enough for them to initiate a class action. Housing is a basic right for citizens and a clear obligation for a responsible government. The community is fighting a David and Goliath battle in the Supreme Court, and the Davids of this world have been tarred as Greens. They just want to understand why they are being evicted from their homes. The Labor government is failing public housing residents, with waiting lists ballooning, promises not being kept and the bedrooms available plummeting through mismanagement. It is time to lift the veil of secrecy from Victoria's public housing projects. Public housing residents are being sent from their long-time communities for up to 10 years with no real understanding of when they will be able to return.

I believe there might have even been a state government contribution, but the Somali community, particularly in Flemington, has advocated for a very long time for a brand new community centre down there. I have had a tour through. It is fantastic. It has got rooms where people can study; it has got a community meeting space. How are people meant to get there if they are being relocated to suburbs that are quite far away? It is splitting up the community, splitting up family and friends from their communities.

I just say: if this was a Liberal government doing this and we were being as opaque as the Labor Party are, you could imagine the roars of outrage on that side. You could just imagine it. If the government were transparent about the needs and the reasons, we would be up for that conversation, but they are not. I think this is a sensible motion. We want more transparency, we are for more transparency, and so for that reason I believe that this motion should be supported.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:47): I also rise to speak on this motion brought forward by the Greens to do with the Flemington estate. One of the points in this motion, point (2), says:

that this report outlines a feasible alternative to the government's current plan to demolish and privatise the high-rise public housing estate at the site of 120 Racecourse Road, Flemington ...

My team has had a bit of a chance to go through this report, and one thing that I will point out is that it uses lots of publicly available information. It is effectively what I would call a desktop analysis, and I have had exposure to another desktop analysis and the government making a decision based on that desktop analysis. The last one that I came across was actually to do with the Commonwealth Games, and we know how that turned out. I think even the government has learned from that particular scenario that it was a very, very bad idea.

I will point out a couple of other things. I am sure Dr Ratnam would be aware of the concept of precision. The estimates given in this report, despite being based on publicly available information and estimates, nonetheless seem to indicate a precision down to the absolute dollar. For example, on page 50 they have tried to estimate total construction costs. They estimated it at \$650,670,482. Anyone

familiar with financial modelling or scientific measurements or any of this sort of thing will be familiar with the concept of precision. This is where if you claim higher levels of precision than you should be able to claim – and in this case I think any reasonable person would think estimating down to the dollar is unreasonable – then you are actually being deceptive and misleading by claiming that level of precision. Even in the budget papers the government does not claim down to the dollar. In fact they round it to the nearest million in the budget papers. In this as well they should have attempted to at least come up with some sort of factor of uncertainty, and they did not do that. They seemed very certain, down to the dollar in fact, which is incredible.

There are some real practical issues with refurbishment. If you are going to refurbish a tower, that means that you need to have trades men and women, I suppose – tradespeople – going in and out of the towers, taking down plaster, fixing things, doing electronics and doing all of the work. If they have to replace the lifts, they will have to shut down the lifts. During this entire time people will have to be disrupted and relocated, regardless of whether you knock the tower down or not. You cannot have a situation where you have got armies of workers going in and out of a building while people are still living there. It simply cannot work that way. What you are going to end up with in the end is an inferior product. You are going to end up with something that is rebuilt, attempting to slap a new coat of paint on something that was built decades and decades ago and has reached its end of life. Every infrastructure asset has an end of life, has a useful lifetime. Sometimes you can extend them. You can repair things. You can fix things. But ultimately buildings have a lifespan and they have to come to an end, and I think it is very clear that these housing towers have reached their end of life and that they need to be demolished. I do not see why the Greens think that they can just slap a new coat of paint on it and keep it going forever. It does not seem like a technically feasible thing to do.

Members interjecting.

David LIMBRICK: I do not have a report. I am looking at a report that is estimating down to the dollar, and I do not believe it. No-one should believe it, because it is unreasonable.

Members interjecting.

David LIMBRICK: I think it is my turn to speak. Making decisions like this based on desktop analysis is a terrible idea. I do not think that this is a feasible alternative, and therefore the Libertarian Party will not be supporting this motion.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (14:52): I rise to speak on this motion in relation to the Flemington public housing towers today. I want to start by saying that I find the handling of this issue – the way the Greens are handling this issue – distressing, and I find it distressing for three reasons. The distortion of the facts, the untruths and the misnaming and misdescribing of our government strategy are just frustrating. I feel like I am being spun a yarn by the Greens when I listen, knowing what our actual strategy is. The second reason is that if I feel this way, I know residents must also be receiving more than one message, more than one story, about what is going on where they live. The third reason why I find it distressing is that it feels like the Homes Victoria staff are being demonised for the work that they are doing, and that really upsets me.

When I was a university student – I was studying social work at the time – you had to do a fieldwork placement every year, and I did my final one with the Office of Housing. It is the only time I have ever had any direct relationship with them. It was a community project where the next batch of 20 residents – it was a pilot project – were going to be consulted. They were on the top of the list. They were going to get into these units in Brunswick somewhere, and they were being consulted by the Office of Housing, now Homes Victoria, to ask them what some of the details of their new accommodation were that they would like. It was a participative kind of decision-making process, and the Office of Housing staff did an awesome job. My job and my colleagues' job as students was to write that up and to describe how much the residents appreciated being asked about what colour paint

they wanted and knowing that in a year's time, in six months time, they would be moving into this particular unit and these certain things would be happening.

I know just how much confidence we can have and how much depth of experience there is in Homes Victoria and how dedicated they are. They often belong to the same community as the people they are working with; for instance, in the Flemington towers. I just want to give a vote of confidence to the Homes Vic staff for the work that they are doing and express my deep disappointment that the Greens have chosen to politicise something as basic as the roof over your head for political gain and to do so in such a distorting, negative and political way while working with a group of people a high proportion of whom are new arrivals. For generations, including my grandparents and so on, new arrivals have come to this country from conflict zones – from areas where there are cultural differences and sometimes significantly where there are language barriers. There is an increased vulnerability from their misunderstanding of the information that they are being given. When you have got a party running a muck-up game for the work that Homes Victoria are doing, that is incredibly distressing for the residents involved. What should they believe? That is what I find really concerning.

If I go specifically to the dilemma – and there has been a bit of discourse about this here in the last half an hour – about whether or not to refurbish or to demolish and build new, I acknowledge Mr Limbrick's contribution. I think he put it very clearly. Refurbishment always has regulatory obligations that sometimes cost extra or just as much. Let us have a look. Let us go through these rules. Refurbishment would not be able to provide an adequate fire resistance rating between the apartments, lifts big enough to allow an ambulance, waste chutes big enough for the building, fire stairs close enough to apartment entries, and hobless showers and communal corridors wide enough to allow – you just need to look up the regulatory standards. Anybody renovating a public building will have to meet modern standards for safety. You would be the first to criticise us if we were not meeting those standards. Floor-to-ceiling heights do not even meet the standards now. Renovation is out of the question just from looking at the regulatory standards.

Members interjecting.

Jacinta ERMACORA: That is right.

A member interjected.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Exactly. As has been said and argued very well by others so far, there would always be displacement in any process. Whether it is a renovation or a demolition and rebuild, there would be displacement.

In my last couple of minutes, I just want to close by acknowledging very much that this process is an honourable process that is going to result in not only better accommodation for those that are currently residing in those places but also more accommodation. This will actually increase the number of houses when the project is complete. We can say it over and over again and you can choose not to believe it if you want, but do not peddle untruths about our strategies.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I take up Mr Batchelor's interjection that if you do not care about these people, then you are going to play a muck-up game and you are going to exploit them and use them for your own political gain.

In closing, I want to say that this really is distressing and the untruths are distressing. The dignity and rights of residents are being cut across and undermined and it is causing confusion, and that is even without language and cultural barriers. Many people that come from conflict zones in other parts of the world where there are authorities that are corrupt are very fearful about authority in this country, and it takes a generation to understand it. Then to have government parties playing a game with them can be retraumatising, absolutely adding to the trauma of these communities.

I want to finish up by saying thank you to the Homes Victoria staff, who I am confident are doing an absolutely awesome job and must be getting incredibly sick of being run down in this chamber.

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:02): I do not really know where to begin here. I suppose at the beginning; that is the logical place. I have heard a lot of fanciful stories in this place in my time. Not since we had the last change in WorkCover legislation have I seen something so ridiculous. We all remember that, don't we? That is right. That is when the Labor Party abandoned the workers of Victoria. In one fell swoop they determined that even though you have a mental health injury and even though you have got a substantiated claim, they are going to cut you off at the knees: 'Workers, there you go. Sorry about your mental health, but due to the Minister for Mental Health in this state of Victoria, we're going to cut you off at the knees.' Well, they have finished with the good –

Ryan Batchelor: On a point of order, Acting President, I am sure Mr McGowan has a great contribution to make on the motion. This is not it.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): There is no point of order, but keep to the script, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: That is fine, Acting President McArthur. I accept the point of order because I think he has foreshadowed a great contribution. That is what I intend to give. There are no two ways about that. But not since that time have we seen the Labor Party abandon the workers of this state in such an unfathomable and despicable way. Do not leave us now, Mr Erdogan: this will be of great interest to your constituents. Now of course they are turning their backs on renters, and not any old normal renters, no – the most vulnerable renters in this state. I have a great deal of respect for Minister Shing; she knows this already. But Minister Shing, you and I both know that all I want, all I am asking for –

Harriet Shing: Is a toilet in Ringwood.

Nick McGOWAN: I would love a toilet, but that is Minister Pearson's. We will talk about him at some point in this speech; I will find some space for him in the next 8 minutes. All I want for the people of Victoria is just a couple of bits of paperwork; just some bits of paperwork is all I am asking for – just something that says to us in some way, shape or form that this multibillion-dollar scheme to tear down 44 housing commission towers has some logic somewhere. Even the court right now cannot decide, and thank God the court is involved, because they are going to decide one way or the other what you asked for. Was the question to all of these construction companies and all these architects – or was there a question at all? Or was it simply, as is my experience with government from time to time, the ministerial way of making decisions? That is right – this way. It is the finger in the air. We will just see which way the wind is blowing. Well, sadly for renters in this state and sadly for those who are actually caught up in the midst of this crisis, they are finding themselves in an untenable situation.

You only need to look at today's *Age* article by Rachael Dexter, and I will quote this – and I am sure all my colleagues across the way here have also seen the quotes. This is what they have said. This is a Victorian right now, a vulnerable Victorian who has been forced to live in the new housing provided – not the privatised housing; they have already sold that off for profit. We do not know for how much profit that was for.

But did we see the good news yesterday? A little tangent here, Acting President McArthur, if I may: they are going to drop some stamp duty for millionaires row. This is the Labor Party again. They are going to take stamp duty off the high-end apartments in this state, not even coming through on the planning provisions. I digress for just a second to make that salient point that yet again we have the modern Labor Party abandoning workers and abandoning investors, and now they are abandoning renters, the very people they profess to like. You can hear directly from them. Do not take my word

for it – no, not at all, Minister. It is so fortunate you are here right now, Minister for Corrections; this is for you. It is a beautiful article:

Tenants packed a courtroom to watch the proceedings on Tuesday, including Alicia Lai –
I have not met Alicia, but I look forward to meeting her very soon –

who has turned down an offer to move from her two-bedroom flat in a tower for a one-bedroom apartment ...

So she has been cut in half. I do not know where she puts her stuff. Presumably she puts it on top of herself. She has been forced to move into a one-bedroom apartment run by external agency.

My God. Why do governments do this when they get into government? They keep tendering it out to community organisations or other organisations. They divest themselves of responsibility and therefore accountability. It does my head in. We do it all the time. It does not matter who is in government. They keep doing it. Stop it. Have your department responsible to some direct line of accountability.

Minister, you will love this:

“It’s only very small,” Lai said of the apartment. “It’s like a prison.

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, but your prison is probably bigger. I have seen them – yours is probably bigger. She went on:

There’s only one window in the bedroom. There’s no window in the lounge room.”

There is no window in the lounge room, Minister. I mean, I have backpacked. I have had my fair share of staying in Earl’s Court, London Bridge or Tower Hill in London. I even once shared accommodation with all these squatters called Australians, like me. We did not pay very much.

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: Well, I call myself that.

Harriet Shing: That sounds like illegal activity, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: No, it was not illegal; I do not think it was illegal. But we shared this house and the four bedrooms coming off it. There was a one combined lounge room and there were no windows. There were just the doors to the bedrooms and a shower, incidentally.

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: There was a shower in the lounge room – it was insane. It was almost as insane as this apartment you are building. I do hope that you follow up with Alicia about her complaints in this respect.

I am looking for time, but there are some very serious points at play here. Housing towers are 10 per cent of the public housing stock. We know this. The minister knows this. I am not telling you anything she does not know. But here is perhaps what Victorians do not know in terms of the amount of rooms that are actually available for vulnerable Victorians: the big build so far has seen total public housing bedrooms reduce – that is right, ladies and gentlemen, reduce – from 160,348 to 157,342. They are the facts as of July 2023.

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: ‘Why 2023?’ you ask. I heard that question. Well, it is 2023 because we actually do not have regular data. Minister, I know you are about to release some data, so I would only be too happy if you wanted to release that data early today. It would be like a Christmas present to

me – a Halloween present, even earlier. But either which way, I would happily accept that data, as would the Greens and the crossbench.

Harriet Shing interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: I would think about trading you the toilet for lots of things but not for decent accommodation for Victorians. I could not do that to them. I would have to buy the toilet myself, construct it at Ringwood East train station and still leave Victorians with proper regional accommodation. That is what I would have to do.

That is just rooms. Basically what we have in the state of Victoria with the big build – I call it the ‘big fraud’, let us be honest – is a reduction of rooms by the order of 3006. For all the big build –

Harriet Shing interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: No wonder my hair looks like this, Minister – 3006 fewer rooms. A reduction in rooms by 3006 for the big build – the big fraud, sorry; my stumbling block. That is rooms. Let us go to homes, shall we?

The government had 64,725 public homes in June 2018. It sounds reasonable, sort of, but guess what, halfway through the big fraud, as of December 2023, they had 64,547. For those of you –

Harriet Shing interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: I cannot quite hear that interjection, but I will come back to you, Minister, because I do want to hear what you have to say – I love what you have to say. Again in terms of homes, we have a net reduction in the state of Victoria thanks to the big fraud. We have a net reduction in Victoria of 178 homes. What is going on here, Minister? You have built more prison cells than we have built homes in the state of Victoria. You can take pride in that in some respects. The sad thing is you are now actually diverting them. The sad thing is you are closing the courts that would actually put people in them. I mean, at this rate they would be more comfortable in some of your prisons than they would in what we are providing on the other hand. It is mind-boggling what is going on – mind-boggling.

I think it is well within the rights of every Victorian to understand that if we are going to have this multibillion-dollar spend, we just want a little bit of evidence that we are putting the money in the right place at the right time. I know, Minister, it sounds like too much to ask. I know it will require some bureaucrats to shuffle through their paperwork and find a report somewhere. My great concern is – and we will soon find out from the court hearing – what has actually happened here is there has been a unilateral decision. Someone had a brainwave – and this does happen sometimes in a Premier’s office; I have seen some Premier’s offices over the years. Someone, some little darling, has a brainwave, and they suddenly think, ‘I know, let’s do this: we’re going to have the biggest build ever.’ Let us not forget that this was just before the last Premier left. We had the biggest, most exciting build of all time, and we just did that again last week. I actually cannot keep up anymore. There are so many big builds. The problem is it is a big fraud. There is nothing going on. Even last week there was not a single cent attached to anything. No Victorian can actually have any confidence that they will find themselves in a public housing house sooner rather than later. It will be later, and we know it will not be in the rooms, because there are, as I said, 3006 fewer rooms in the state of Victoria with the big fraud. There are also fewer homes. There are 178 fewer homes.

The Greens will cover this adroitly later on, but the truth is what they are actually also doing is using a part-privatisation system – ‘We’ll give a bit here and give a bit there, and we’ll sell the rest off.’ While in Heidelberg, as my colleague Mr Puglielli knows, we have sold off vast tracts of land and been left with nothing to show for it – not a single home. It has been sitting there for years absolutely unused. Then we have the disgraceful episode out at La Trobe University, where the former Premier just put a whole lot of solar panels on this place. He has devastated the natural environment, chopped

down trees and put in solar panels. That would have been an enormous place for homes out there with the solar panels, God forbid, on the roof. That is what he could have done, but he chose not to.

In closing, Minister, I can only hope –

Harriet Shing interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, I would delight in keeping going, but sadly my time has come to an end in this speech – not in this chamber, I hasten to add. I only hope that we have more rooms and more homes in the future.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:12): Well, what a debate it has been. To begin with I just acknowledge the motion before us, which is:

That this house acknowledges:

- (1) the release of OFFICE's report ...
- (2) that this report outlines a feasible alternative to the government's current plan to demolish and privatise the high-rise public housing estate at the site of 120 Racecourse Road, Flemington ...

It outlines an approach that could achieve a complete refurbishment of all homes, match the number of total dwellings proposed by the government's plan, increase the net number of public homes, avoid the displacement of the estate's residents and save the government \$364 million in costs at one site alone. This is a significant report brought together by experts – vastly more than we have seen come out of this government in terms of receipts for the plan that was announced under the former Premier.

To clarify some of the contributions that I think we have heard from government members, this plan, to boil it down a bit further, is that you build new public housing. Residents in estates where refurbishment and repair is required are then moved into that new public housing. Once the refurbishment is complete they are then able to return, collectively, should they wish to do so, to their existing estate. You are not knocking down the existing public homes that we have in this state. Doing so is the destruction of public housing. There seems to be a disconnection happening there with some of the Labor members. It is a completely different plan. It is not some idea of renovating the homes as if people are still literally next door to the renovations. We acknowledge the realities of construction. We can acknowledge that while building new public homes. It does not seem to be grasped by some of the government members.

We have also heard the refuting of the idea of privatisation. Just examining what has been announced, largely through press releases from the government, on the refuting of privatisation: if you are knocking down the existing public housing that we have in this state, collectively, wholesale, you are then rebuilding by private property developers a small portion of community housing, and then the vast remainder of the site becomes private market rate housing. I hate to break it to you: that is privatisation, to put it plain and simple.

We have also heard from Labor members the distress that they are feeling that what is put forward in this report from experts is not matching the scripts that they are receiving from central casting. You know what, if you are reading truth, if you are reading information that is actually provided by experts, as opposed to the air that is coming out of the government right now – I am not seeing documents from them – perhaps that would assuage your concerns because you would be able to make contributions based on fact rather than just opinion. We are hearing a lot of opinions today. We have heard from Labor members about the need for homes for people to live in. As has been noted by my colleague in moving this motion, moving people from the public housing stock and then looking at the new housing that is being proposed – we are hearing from residents that what is being offered to them is not something they are able to afford. What is the alternative for them? They have a home they cannot afford or homelessness. This plan that was announced under the former Premier is putting people in disastrous situations, pushing people to the wall, when we could acknowledge that we need

to build new public housing and get on with doing that job rather than this disastrous plan from this government.

We heard a really quite peculiar contribution from one of the government members around what would be required to repair, say, a kitchen or to repair or renovate a bathroom. It seems as if the government member's contribution indicated that the answer to fixing those problems would be to knock an entire building down. I find that quite worrying. I do not think that is what we are seeing here laid out in the report. Instead it is some kind of fanciful notion of what that renovation project would look like. It is really quite bizarre.

As has been put by one of the Labor members, what should the residents believe? What should people believe? I tell you what they should believe: a cited report from experts that is publicly available as opposed to opinion offered with no citation – purely opinion and vibes. That is what we have seen come out of this Labor government: a plan written on the back of an envelope from a former Premier and announced to the press. That is not good enough. Get a grip.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (15:16): I am pleased to rise and speak in this debate because what Dr Ratnam's motion – the Greens motion – suggests is that there is a report here that is 'a feasible alternative', in the words of the motion, and provides, to quote Dr Ratnam, a meticulously detailed plan:

... that refutes every one of the government's claims to date ...

I want to get into that in a moment. But the central question in this debate is quite simply: what sort of housing do the poorest and most vulnerable in our community deserve? We on the government side are on the side of having better modern energy-efficient homes that meet design standards. The most vulnerable in our community deserve the best standard of homes. The Greens say they do not, and yet again the Liberals side with the Greens.

I want to start this contribution by looking at some of the things that are in this meticulously detailed report that Dr Ratnam wants the house to take note of. It appears I have read it, unlike Mr Puglielli. The report goes through the construction typology of the high-rise towers first finished in 1964:

When the buildings were designed, the code of practice outlined a 50-year life span for these structures.

In 1964 the first one opened, designed for a 50-year life span. Sixty years ago they said it was designed for a 50-year life span, and that is what the Greens think is the most appropriate place for the most vulnerable in our community to live.

The second issue which I will come to in the OFFICE report is looking at their assessment of the structural condition of these towers, the structural condition in which the Greens seek to house our most vulnerable. The OFFICE report says:

The structural assessment identified both non-compliance within the existing building to current code as well as strength deficiencies ...

So their report says these structures do not meet the current code and have strength deficiencies where the Greens think the most vulnerable in our community should live. It goes on to say:

A number of construction elements within the existing building were deemed to be noncompliant when assessed against current codes ...

It goes into details like the general principles and a whole lot of other elements, including wall reinforcement spacing, where it says:

A number of existing walls are non-compliant as the vertical and horizontal reinforcement exceed the maximum distance.

There is noncompliance with the minimum wall reinforcement requirements. A minimum quantity of reinforcement is required within structural walls, so the buildings the Greens want to preserve have structural deficiencies. Fine, they say – they can be fixed. The whole premise of this proposal from the

Greens is that the structural deficiencies outlined in their own report can be fixed. So let us look at how they propose to fix them as part of their renovation plan. The OFFICE report suggests that to fix these problems with the structural deficiencies in the buildings you would need to put steel plate reinforcement along the buildings. To reinforce the concrete structures with an exoskeleton of steel, that is what you are proposing – to retrofit them to the faces of the concrete walls. Looking at figure 14 on page 61, it suggests that each floor that you affix these steel exoskeletons to requires 17 steel bolts to be drilled into the concrete structure, not just once but on every floor on every side of the building that is to be reinforced with structural steel.

One thing that is missing from the report that the Greens are proposing – the report that you suggest we should take note of and read – is the environmental impacts. There is no assessment of the environmental impacts on residents of the noise of drilling steel reinforcement into the concrete above people's homes. That is what you are proposing. But I will get back to compliance. I will not spend all of my time talking about the noise and dust that you want to subject these residents to as a steel exoskeleton is affixed to their homes.

We want to talk about the sewer stacks, because the sewer stacks failing is the reason that the first two of these 44 public-housing towers have been condemned for human habitation. There is sewage in the walls. The sewer stacks have failed, and the residents have had to move out. The proposal that the Greens are advocating for is:

Existing sewer stacks to be inspected.

Their proposal is that they go and have a look at them, whereas we know that these sewer stacks are failing and causing difficulty for residents. But what is worse is the other element of noncompliance is – and this is from the report of existing conditions that the OFFICE report refers to:

Evidence of dampness in walls throughout the building and the formation of efflorescence and mould within sole occupancy units. The sewer stacks appear to be the source of internal dampness.

You can draw your own conclusions about what that means. But the proposed approach in the OFFICE report on the Flemington flats to the mould in the walls caused by sewage is 'n/a' – not applicable. This report, their plan, has 'Not applicable' as the proposed approach to dealing with the mould caused by sewage leaking into the walls of these residents. That is what the Greens want to have as the standard for the most vulnerable in our community. There is more. I cannot go on.

What I also want to say is that even if you could fix all of these problems the designs that this report proposes our most vulnerable residents live in will not meet the *Better Apartments Design Standards*. The report says they cannot meet the *Better Apartments Design Standards*. They cannot do it; they will not do it. Their plan will not even create apartments that meet the *Better Apartments Design Standards*. I cannot even get into the discussion about ceiling heights, although I would like to. I want to get to the point about relocations, because Mr Puglielli in his contribution said you can avoid displacement but the OFFICE report says that you have got to dislocate everyone from their current homes. Alternatively, option 1 in the OFFICE report suggests that they will only move people out five floors at a time. Imagine this: whilst they are drilling steel bolts into concrete walls below you, the Greens would subject residents to the noise, the dusk, the disruption and the inconvenience of living in the midst of one of the most disruptive renovations that would ever occur, without any kind of lifts, because they would be out of order whilst you were replacing them, and without any kind of environmental impact or assessment.

More to the point, the costings in their report do not even have an allowance for resident relocation. There is no support. They say the relocation costs are minimal and that you can save \$227 million off the cost estimates. When the cost estimates for the relocation costs they are benchmarked against are \$227 million, there is no money in this plan for residents' relocation. They want them to stay in the towers, putting up with dust and noise whilst half the building has a steel skeleton put on the outside.

This is not a plan for better apartments, this is a plan to leave these people in exactly the same condition as they are in now.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:27): I rise to share a few remarks on this, noting that we do not have a great deal of time left in this debate and I am anxious to hear from my colleague Ms Watt as well –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Michael GALEA: As indeed is Mr McIntosh. I was planning to talk about some of the many, many structural issues that would prevent this sort of proposal from going forward, but Mr Batchelor has so well elucidated that in his contribution – the impact of steel being ground into concrete alone, let alone all the other impacts, and talking about things such as the fire resistance levels and the size of lifts to allow for ambulance stretchers, the size of the waste chutes, the distance from apartments entries to fire stairs, the provision of hobless showers, the width of communal corridors or the floor-to-ceiling heights. These are all things that are completely ignored by this dud proposal from the Greens.

But what I find interesting is that we have seen members of the opposition here today speak in favour of this motion, a motion which specifically calls on the government to stop its plans to redevelop and reinvest in these public housing towers, these valuable assets in inner-city Melbourne, in projects that would in fact increase threefold the amount of housing provided on the sites across inner-city Melbourne. It is absolutely emblematic of an opposition that says one thing about being all for development and says one thing about being YIMBY and then turns around and backs in motions that oppose up to 20,000 new homes in developments in areas with good public transport.

Enver Erdogan interjected.

Michael GALEA: Someone's first speech even – indeed, you are quite right, Minister Erdogan. The Liberals cannot hide from the fact that by supporting this motion they are all tying themselves with the creepy antics of the member for Brighton, peering through glass windows in hotels, opposing sensible infill development in activity centres and opposing sensible redevelopment that will provide habitable, livable housing not just for those that can afford to purchase or rent but for those in social housing as well. Only the Labor Party it seems is standing up for those people in social housing in order for them to have those same rights of livability and habitability that every other Victorian rightly expects and deserves to have. Only the Labor Party is standing here in support of more housing, whether it be, as in this motion, for the inner city of Melbourne or whether it be in the outer suburbs of Melbourne or in regional Victoria, providing those options. Whether you are purchasing, renting or in social housing – whatever situation that you are in – this is a government for all Victorians, including young Victorians, which the Liberals are so happy to ignore and so happy to neglect. Only Labor will support the aspirations of millennials and Gen Z to live and work and play in the areas of Victoria where they want to be. I will conclude my remarks there as I understand that Ms Watt has a contribution as well.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (15:30): Thank you for the call and the opportunity to make a contribution to the final motion put forward by Dr Ratnam in this place, and I am going to take the time to say thank you for the chance to again speak about public, social and community housing, something that I very deeply support. I also thank my colleague Mr Galea for giving me a moment to make a contribution.

The truth is that this community is a community that I know. It is a community that I talk to, and I have talked to the folks from OFFICE, so let me go through and make some points really clear. Firstly, I just cannot believe that I am sitting here with a motion before us that condemns people to live in a construction zone. These are folks that are really unwell. They have young families. My mind cannot comprehend it, because I know what it means when the lifts do not work on level 11. I know what it means when folks with walking frames are trying to get to their place and they cannot because

something has gone awry with the lifts. I know that these folk deserve better. They deserve a home that is modern and that is fit for purpose.

I just want to spend this time talking about the folks that already live there. I want to talk about the thousands of folks waiting, because those are the folks that I connect with. Those are the folks that I understand. Those folk were me, because I spent my entire childhood waiting for a home, and with this motion before us nothing will change. What I want to see is more homes for more Victorians, for the Victorians that need them most. I know the absolute despair of getting that letter saying you have got longer to wait, and it is heartbreaking. I know what it means to be picked up and separated from your community and moved around because of the uncertainty of the private housing market. What we need is more affordable homes. What we need is more social homes.

The providers that are out there are doing the very best that they can. They are working in partnership with community organisations. They are working in partnership with healthcare providers, schools and the people that need them to be really responsible home providers. The folks that I met from Haven Home Safe are looking to work with Aboriginal communities to build strong communities for traditional owners. That is what they want to do. The constant attacks on community housing providers, for me, are really hurtful, because I know the intentions of these folks. I worked with these folks. My last job before coming into this place was finding homes and finding jobs for people sitting on the public housing and social housing waiting list. Those folks deserve a home, and they deserve the dignity of a home that is right and safe and provides them the security that they deserve in their many years to come.

I have got to tell you that demonising social and community housing providers is a really hurtful thing. These workers feel it, and they do not deserve it. And the harmful misinformation being spread right across our community is very, very damaging. To the workers at Haven Home Safe and Wombat and everywhere, I know you and I see you and I support you, and this government supports you. We will not continue to sit back and allow these attacks to go on, because you guys are doing an incredible job supporting families escaping family violence and supporting families that are doing it tough, that are managing really complex mental health needs. We know that you are doing the right thing, and you have allies and friends here on this side – perhaps not so much among those behind us – because there is a truth, and that is that more Victorians deserve more homes, including those waiting, waiting and waiting.

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (15:35): Thank you to everyone who has made a contribution this afternoon to this really critical debate. What we have heard this afternoon, in summary, is the government once again going on the attack because they have got nothing else. Not a shred of alternative evidence has been presented once again. We have come to expect this, because in 12 months we have still not seen a shred of evidence provided by Labor to justify their plans to demolish and privatise public housing across the state.

We have heard Labor members talk about maintenance and talk about the state of the current public housing towers. But let us remind everyone about what has happened under Labor's watch. The Productivity Commission has found that Labor has spent the least per capita of any state in the country on the maintenance of public housing. We are at the bottom of the ladder. Do you want to know why there are complaints about public housing? Because Labor let that happen. They have just scrapped funding to upgrade the sewer stacks at every Victorian public housing tower right now. Do you want to cite the sewer stacks that stopped working at Carlton? Well, Labor did that. This is Thatcherism. You keep the funding low, you let the public services run to the ground and you say, 'Sorry, it's too hard to fix' – on your watch. Labor has been in power for nearly a decade. You have run public housing into the ground. You had the chance to fix it. If you cared about modern homes, you would have spent the funding to keep these homes livable. It is still possible, and we are urging this government to take the lives and homes of public housing residents seriously.

Remarkably, what we have heard in this debate – or perhaps what we have not heard in this debate – is not one single government member refer to a conversation they have had with a public housing resident that is directly impacted by the imminent demolitions. It speaks to the contempt with which you treat public housing residents and many of us in the chamber who bother to go down to the estates week on week and talk to residents directly.

I can tell you about the conversations I have had with residents, about how they tell us they are not being offered alternatives and they are being pushed into rents they cannot afford and they are worried they will be left homeless by Labor. That is what Labor is promising. If we want more public housing in this state, if we want to bring that waitlist of 120,000 to zero, you know what we have to do? We have to build 100,000 public homes right now, not demolish the ones that we have. We have a plan from OFFICE that can build more at the Flemington estate alone. You can multiply that by 44 to see how much public housing we could have at these estates, let alone all the public sites that this Victorian Labor government is earmarking and packaging up for sale. Something like 2500 hectares of public land is being packaged up by Labor for sale right now – land that can be used to build public housing.

I hear the appeals to bring that waitlist down and to end homelessness. You know what you have to do to end homelessness in Victoria? Build public housing. You have got to build public housing, not luxury penthouses, not private apartments that no-one can afford. Under Labor's watch we have seen the greatest retreat from public housing that we have ever seen, and the Minister for Housing is about to preside over the greatest destruction of public housing Victoria has ever seen. That is the legacy of the Allan Labor government, presiding over the greatest destruction of public housing Victoria has ever seen. Make no mistake about it, that is what is on the table. Two-thirds of each of those estates are about to be handed over to private developers – two-thirds of that land that we could save for public housing to build more public homes so that everyone can have a good-quality, affordable place to call home.

You know what solves the housing crisis? Public housing. You know what ends homelessness? Public housing. You know what guarantees affordable housing in this state? Public housing. The once great Labor Party believed that too, but they have lost all their courage. They have lost all their vision. And you know who they listen to? Developers. Developers are the only ones around the table, not residents, not housing experts, not academics, not architects, not designers, not engineers – just the developers who want to make a profit. And they have lucked out big with this Victorian Labor government, their best friend. You could have seen the dollar eyes as the developers walked with Labor across those estates and said, 'You know what we can do? We can commercialise this full estate.' You want to talk about commodifying? That is what Labor is doing to every Victorian that is on the housing register at the moment, to the 30,000 who are experiencing homelessness right now. Well, I will tell you something: not on our watch. Not on our watch are you going to destroy public housing in Victoria. Save public housing in Victoria. This Parliament has the chance to do it right now.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (18): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Richard Welch

Noes (18): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

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

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:47): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 663, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

*Motions***Road maintenance**

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (15:48): I move:

That this house notes that:

- (1) under the Allan Labor government Victoria has some of the worst road conditions in the country;
- (2) failure to repair roads in a timely manner has caused Victoria's road network to crumble;
- (3) the Allan Labor government announced an investment of \$964 million to repair Victorian roads in the 2024–25 state budget;
- (4) 70 per cent of this investment, being \$675 million, will be specifically spent on repairing roads in regional Victoria;
- (5) there is anecdotal evidence that previous work to repair Victorian roads has been substandard, with many roads needing new repairs after only a short period of time;

and calls on the government to ensure that repairs undertaken during this latest road repair blitz are of the highest quality and standard to ensure that delivering Victorians world-standard road infrastructure.

This is a very important motion as regional Victoria's road network is most definitely one of the worst, if not the worst, in the country. Potholes, crumbling uneven surfaces and rutting are just some of the issues facing regional Victorians every single day. Victorian road authorities are filling almost 700 potholes per day across the state. This equates to almost nine potholes per kilometre of road in Victoria.

In the 2023–24 financial year 1200 motorists made claims for damages to their vehicles. When you consider that repairs for damages must be over \$1400 to be able to make such a claim, this number is just a fraction of motorists who have had to pay to repair their vehicles. Costs for motorists are only going up and up. From increases to fuel taxes, registration and TAC and maintenance costs, Victorians are struggling under the crippling costs of just getting around. The cost of repairs to damage caused by poorly maintained roads is something that many Victorians simply cannot afford in this cost-of-living crisis.

On 30 July this year the RACV released results from its annual road safety survey, and they were damning. Sixty-four per cent of respondents identified potholes and poor road conditions as their top concern. In fact all the roads of top concern in this survey are in my electorate of Northern Victoria: the Melba Highway, the Goulburn Valley Highway, Tylden-Woodend Road, Kilmore Road and the intersection of the Midland Highway and Howard Street in Epsom. This is disgraceful. Regional Victorians are being treated like second-class citizens in this state. It seems like our city-centric government has forgotten that they govern the whole state, not just the metro area. With blowouts on major metro projects, including the Suburban Rail Loop and Metro Tunnel, totalling at least \$41 billion, is it any wonder regional Victorians have lost faith in this government and their ability to manage the state budget? Yet the government blame everyone but themselves. They blame global factors, contractors, supply chain issues – anyone but themselves. The government cannot keep blaming the flood event of 2022 for the crumbling road network; it is the abject failure of the Allan Labor government to maintain the roads.

The crumbling road network comes down to poor workmanship in many cases. If the roads were fixed properly the first time, maintenance crews would not have to return to the same spot time and time

again. I have seen evidence of potholes and crumbling sections of road that have been patched with nothing more than a small amount of hot mix. How could anyone think this is a viable and permanent solution? In most cases this is not even a good temporary fix as the patching is sloppy, lumpy and almost as rough as the problem it is meant to fix. These temporary fixes are not good enough. It makes one wonder where the almost \$4 billion that was allocated over the last two financial years to fix our road network has gone, because it is clearly not on maintaining the road network in regional Victoria. Victorian road users deserve roads that are fixed properly. In many cases this might mean that the damaged section of road is completely ripped up and replaced from the base.

In my almost two years as a member for the Northern Victoria electorate I have lost count of the number of times the state of the roads has been raised in my office. I have heard so many of my colleagues in this place ask question after question: when will the roads be fixed? The frustration in the community is palpable. They want to know what is being done to make their roads safer. The road toll has only gone up in the past two years, and it leads one to wonder whether the abysmal road conditions have had at least some part to play in that. Another cry I have heard from my constituents and which I have heard Mrs McArthur raise on many occasions is: if our cars must be roadworthy, why aren't our roads carworthy?

Wendy Lovell interjected.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: And Ms Lovell. That is a very good question I would like an answer to as well.

I will commend the government for finally announcing the funding of the \$964 million they promised in the May budget and the allocation of 70 per cent of this budget to regional roads, but they must ensure that the job is done properly. It is the belief of many of my constituents that the government's contractors are not doing their jobs properly. Contractors must be held accountable for subpar repairs. The Department of Transport and Planning, who are responsible for road maintenance, must ensure the contractors that they hire are fulfilling their responsibility to the Victorian taxpayer and are doing the job up to standard.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:53): I rise today to speak on the motion which has been put before us by Mrs Tyrrell. Indeed I acknowledge and thank her for bringing this matter to the chamber, and I do note her very sincere passion for the roads in Victoria and in particular in her electorate of the Northern Victoria Region.

At the outset I feel it would be remiss of me to make some remarks about road maintenance and road safety if I did not acknowledge what was a tragic and unthinkable disaster that happened not too far away from here in fact yesterday at Auburn South Primary School. It is quite frankly unfathomable to think, to consider or to put yourself in that situation, whether as a child, as a parent or as a teacher, and I join I am sure quite literally everybody in this place in sending my very best wishes, futile though they may be in light of what has happened. I acknowledge the remarks made by the Premier, the Minister for Education, the member for Hawthorn and indeed members of this place in the adjournment last night. There is quite literally nothing I can say to improve what has happened, but I think it is important that when we are discussing roads, and by extension road safety, we acknowledge that. I urge all Victorians to be as careful as they possibly can be behind the wheel.

The motion before us today concerns road maintenance. I acknowledge that there is indeed more to be done to deliver the road conditions that Victorians rightly expect. These last few years have been challenging, and it is true to say that the significant flood events and the extended rain events, including those substantial rainfall patterns which we have seen outside of the standard seasonal trends, have caused a build-up of wear on our roads beyond what is usually experienced.

Over the next nine months crews will complete thousands of projects on our network, ranging from road rehabilitation and resurfacing to patching potholes and maintaining bridges, traffic lights, signage and road infrastructure. This will be achieved through a \$964 million investment in road maintenance,

which I will discuss in more detail shortly and to which I also made a brief reference in the short form documents motion this morning. Last year much of the road maintenance work was focused on addressing those significantly damaged roads that were impacted by the successive flood events. In many cases they required more significant rebuilding and repairing than would normally be the case. With that work now complete, resurfacing and rehabilitation levels will significantly increase during the upcoming maintenance season.

As a road user myself, I can understand how there are frustrations with frequent sections requiring resurfacing. Unfortunately in some cases major road maintenance projects require extended periods of warmer and drier conditions in order to get the job done properly, which is why most work is done between now and May each year to ensure that the repairs last and we are getting the most efficient value from our maintenance budget. Undertaking such significant repairs outside this normal maintenance window would not only require comparatively higher costs per project but would be less effective as water can compromise the quality of those resurfacing and repair works, causing them to wear faster and require maintenance sooner.

To be clear, this is a government that is committed to delivering high-quality repairs and targeting them to where they are needed the most. At the heart of this motion from Mrs Tyrrell is a call for quality and substantive road maintenance, and I would say that this is what the government is working towards and is committed to delivering. We have averaged in our time in government \$736 million a year in funding towards maintaining our roads, a figure that is substantially higher than when those opposite were last in power, which was \$493 million a year. This year alone we are investing \$964 million, which is the equivalent of \$2.6 million a day, just on road repairs, upgrades and maintenance.

Notably, 70 per cent of this funding is going to be targeted towards works in regional Victoria, so substantial investment is being made to improve the quality of our roads outside Melbourne. Just a few weeks ago the Minister for Roads and Road Safety announced the start of the maintenance season. Crews are already getting out to rebuild, repair and resurface hundreds of kilometres of Victorian roads thanks to the largest single-year investment in road maintenance in Victoria's history. This includes \$770 million for our regular maintenance program, which is on par with our massive blitz last year, as well as additional funding to clean up flood damage. The blitz will target the state's busiest travel and trade routes, with works set to be delivered on the Hume Freeway, Princes Highway, Western Highway, Goulburn Valley Highway, Echuca–Mooroopna road, Terang–Mortlake Road, Mornington–Flinders Road, Horsham–Kalkee road and Tylden–Woodend Road, which I believe was one of the roads Mrs Tyrrell mentioned. This is part of our massive \$6.6 billion 10-year investment, which allows us to plan long term and futureproof regional roads to ensure that they are equipped to accommodate the state's rapid growth and increasing freight demand.

Our roads have been taking a beating. The last few years have been some of the wettest in our state's history, with consistently extreme weather events in 2022, 2023 and as recently as July this year. This means that the roads require more significant work to be repaired, maintained and resurfaced. Indeed last year, as I say, much of the funding allocated had to be focused on those roads most seriously impacted by floods. With flood events and out-of-season rain events being more frequent in the last three years, careful planning has been required to address these needs. This year's blitz is focused on improving the overall quality of our road network for commuters. Among the myriad projects, you will see works progressing across our road network, including on Centre Road between Haughton Road and Police Road in Clayton and on Stud Road between Heatherton Road and Cheam Street in Dandenong North. This of course comes on top of our announcement in the budget this year to install pedestrian lights at Mcfees Road and Stud Road, and I acknowledge outgoing mayor of Greater Dandenong Lana Formoso's very impressive campaign on that issue as well.

Works will progress on the Mornington–Flinders Road between Berry Road and Keys Road in Flinders and – this will absolutely interest you, Dr Heath – on Nar Nar Goon–Longwarry Road between Bunyip–Modella Road and Berry Lane in Bunyip and indeed also on the South Gippsland Highway

between Mckittericks Road and Charltons Road in Stony Creek. I know that you will be very excited about those three projects in your region alone, Dr Heath, which are just a small smattering of the many, many projects being funded under this record investment.

I would also like to touch on the fact that the government is working with our local councils to deliver safer roads across Victoria. Councils operate, in kilometre terms, the largest amount of our state's road network. Indeed for the recent Economy and Infrastructure Committee hearings on local government I along with others in this room – I believe Mr Mulholland and Mrs McArthur were there – had Cardinia Shire Council present to us. They are responsible for the maintenance of around 800 kilometres of sealed roads and around the same amount of unsealed roads in their local government area.

Just this week the \$210 million Safe Local Roads and Streets program commenced. This program will provide \$2 million to all 79 councils in Victoria to support the delivery of a wide range of safety improvements from now until 30 June 2027. That is to every single council, including indeed to Cardinia Shire Council, which I just mentioned. These projects are set to deliver new raised crossings and upgrades to kerbs, intersections, roundabouts and pedestrian islands. These local government authorities own and operate 87 per cent of Victoria's roads, and about 40 per cent of road trauma occurs on council-managed roads every year.

We do know that we have more work to do, particularly in those regional areas. That is why the lion's share of this funding will be going to regional Victoria, where those roads play a vital role in keeping communities connected and hundreds of thousands of tonnes of freight on the move. Our \$6.6 billion strategy for road maintenance over 10 years allows us to target our investment more strategically over the long term. The 10-year funding approach means that we can have a maintenance program that delivers the right kinds of repairs to the highest standard where they are most needed. The multiyear approach also allows us to mitigate future risks in advance rather than waiting for funding certainty, meaning that spending is more efficient.

And returning to this year, I again acknowledge the frustrations that are very real and very valid out there, and for those reasons I have outlined I am very much looking forward to seeing that investment come through. We are committed to having the highest quality repairs where they are most needed, and the Allan Labor government's delivery track record when it comes to this speaks for itself, in sharp contrast with the opposition.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (16:03): I am very glad to speak on this motion, and I thank Mrs Tyrrell for putting it forward to the chamber for discussion. For so many years, particularly this year, we have been calling on the government, desperate for the government to do something about the state of our roads. If you cannot fix the state of our roads – that is a core responsibility of government. This government will go and spend money on frivolous things like the \$216 billion Suburban Rail Loop in the eastern suburbs, but it has not given proper consideration to our roads. We see this being a major concern all over the state. I cannot go to an event in my community without people telling me about the state of our roads, and I know it is probably the same for colleagues opposite.

Perhaps if you travel more around the inner city part of town, you do not get as many concerns, but I tell you what, it is a massive issue in the growth areas of Melbourne. So I was interested to read, with great fanfare and publicity, a front page recently of the *Herald Sun* announcing a so-called maintenance blitz to rebuild and repair the roads that Victorians depend on every single day. It looked like somewhat of a backflip from the government – that it had suddenly discovered that roads are an issue to everyday Victorians – but a little look into the further detail reveals the blitz is nothing more than a reannouncement of funding provided in the state budget in May. Labor have even padded out the funding numbers to include funding that was for flood recovery works.

It is the same spin they announce every year. We saw on the minister's website on 14 October this year 'Road maintenance blitz revs up across regional Victoria'. We also saw, on 11 October 2023, 'Road maintenance blitz kicks off across regional Victoria'; they changed a couple of words. And then we saw, on 7 September 2022 – what do you reckon it was? – 'Road maintenance blitz rolls out across regional Victoria'. So we had 'revs up', 'kicks off' and 'rolls out'. Every single year, as night follows day, the government announces the same spin. But this one was revved up a little bit – the spin was definitely revved up – because they had the gall to pad it out with flood recovery funding to go to flood-damaged roads. It is just classic Labor spin. Of course we know they cannot manage money, and it is Victorian road users that are paying the price.

I hear directly from my constituents all the time regarding the state of our roads. The government have identified works on the Hume Freeway, the Princess Highway, the Western Highway and the Goulburn Valley Highway, but of course there is no money for the Northern Highway, which is of deep concern to residents in the outer northern suburbs. Unfortunately, Labor cannot manage money, and it is Victorian road users that are paying the price.

I want to focus particularly on the suburb of Wallan in my electorate, because anyone who has been to Wallan knows the state of the roads. I have had so many residents that have had multiple incidents a year. It is important to note that roads are a cost-of-living issue. If you are having to replace your tyres two to three times a year and spend that money out of pocket because it is under the threshold of about \$1500 to \$1700, the total cost ends up being more than that, but it is continuous individual instances. If roads got fixed as fast in Wallan as they did in Brunswick, they would actually be pretty happy, but they are not. The people of Wallan are forgotten about because they have got two very lazy local members that ignore residents' concerns about potholes – residents like Dale Wise, who said:

The condition of the roads around Wallan are atrocious and even the new section of road on northern highway near the 7/11 is already breaking up.

These roads need to be heavy duty to cater for the high concentration of heavy vehicles using the northern highway to get into northern Victoria using Watson St to access the Fwy.

Bradley Baldwin from Wallan said:

As a new resident to the area, between the crime, and potholes, what a terrible choice to move here.

Robert Ellul says:

My car tyre exploded shortly after hitting the pothole outside the police station on Watson St.

I am already \$185 out of pocket, and need to take the car to the mechanic to make sure there isn't damage beyond the wheel and tyre.

I note that it has been marked as 'temporarily' 40kph for ... 4 months now –

it is now about eight months –

but no action has been taken ... to ... return to 60kph.

Of course we know the government has across the entire state – including in Mrs McArthur's electorate and Mrs Tyrrell and Ms Lovell's electorates – reduced speed limits basically permanently, which is the same on Watson Street.

Angus Maclean from Wallan says:

I have lived in Hidden Valley Wallan for just over 10 years having moved to Australia in 2012 with my family from Scotland.

The lack of investment in roads and infrastructure has been shocking. Why are we expected to just put up with the condition of the roads?

I've started to look elsewhere to live ...

Liz Garraway from Wallan says:

The Northern Hwy is a corridor ... for hundreds of trucks and the roads in the area should be built to withstand these, as simple pothole repairs get ripped up by the passage of all the truck wheels.

Liz hits the nail on the head with her comments. The work is not done initially, and then patch-up works are not even enough. We saw in Wallan as well that last year my residents were forced, after sending heaps of Snap, Send, Solves and heaps of requests to VicRoads, to fill in a pothole on the Northern Highway with a garden bed saying 'Wallan botanical gardens sponsored by VicRoads'. Do you know how long it took to get fixed after they put in a garden bed? About 24 hours. This is what my constituents are forced to go through in order to get their roads fixed.

This government has caused this cost-of-living issue that leads to people being thousands of dollars out of pocket each year because the government cannot manage money and it cannot repair our roads. It runs the same spin every year in regard to our roads. I am absolutely fed up. Members on this side of the chamber are absolutely fed up. All of the constituents I just read out have contacted the member for Kalkallo and the member for Yan Yean, and they have done nothing to address the crisis of potholes going on in Wallan. It is a disgrace – pothole after pothole. Residents are contacting me in desperation, having had their tyres explode and having had to repair their cars multiple times a year, but that side of the chamber could not care less. They could not care less about my community because they cannot manage money. Dodgy repair works get ripped up within days because the government has not invested in the state of the roads. It is a disgrace. My community are angry about it, so I am angry about it, because I actually listen to my community, unlike the Labor members of Parliament, who have forgotten that the good people of Wallan and Beveridge and places like that actually exist. They have forgotten to listen to their communities and act on their concerns. The state of the roads is a disgrace and so this government.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:13): I rise today to contribute to the discussion on Mrs Tyrrell's motion before the house. This motion is regarding the road maintenance in the state of Victoria. The motion mentions that the Allan Labor government has invested \$964 million into road maintenance in the state. We appreciate the acknowledgement that our government is doing the work to maintain safe roads across the state. The Allan Labor government is committed to the *Victorian Road Safety Strategy 2021–2030*. This strategy will halve road deaths and reduce serious injuries by 2030. The ultimate goal of the road safety strategy 2021–2030 is to eliminate road deaths by 2050. Make no mistake, this is a priority of the Allan Labor government.

We know that disproportionately injuries and fatalities on Victorian roads occur in the regions. Because of this, our government recognises the need for increased attention to be placed on regional roads and road safety outside metropolitan areas. Regional road management is an issue defined by factors often unique to the area. This can include weather events common to areas, erosion and other factors. In recent years we have seen an increase in floods across the state. Northern Victoria in particular was heavily affected by the floods. They impacted not just roads in the area but many other aspects of daily life. Put simply, the floods were devastating. I am sure anybody in this room who was in attendance at the Legislative Council's regional sitting in Echuca would recall this. Situations like these are the exact reason why the Allan government has committed hundreds of millions of dollars to the maintenance of roads.

Our government has established a Safer Local Roads and Streets program, providing funding to numerous councils across the state to improve road safety. Regional councils selected in the second round in 2024 were East Gippsland, Gannawarra, Greater Geelong, Greater Shepparton, Loddon, Mansfield, Mildura, Moorabool, Swan Hill and Wyndham. All councils across the state will participate through the seven rounds by 2025. The program will provide a funding pool of \$210 million in total, with up to \$2 million allocated to each council to deliver upgrades on the highest risk roads, intersections and precincts in the regions by 2027, delivering infrastructure upgrades to keep the community safe, such as raised crossings, intersection upgrades, speed cushions, safer speeds,

roundabouts and other vital safety improvements. For example, this year a busy Clifton Springs intersection in Greater Geelong saw safety improvements through this program's funding with the installation of a roundabout and raised pedestrian crossing at the intersection of Bay Shore Avenue and Jetty Road as well as an adjusted, safer speed limit. This program demonstrates that our government is committed to delivering vital safety measures on our roads, and this intersection in the City of Greater Geelong is a single example of that.

Our road safety program has already established an extensive list of repairs right across the state, especially in regional areas. For example, in the Barwon south-west region a slew of works are set to go ahead, meaning safer roads out west. These works include the construction of flexible safety barriers and road surface treatments. Additionally, the investment in road infrastructure is designed to increase awareness of hazards and improve delineation. This have been occurring at the following locations: Hamilton Highway, Geelong to Inverleigh; Forrest-Apollo Bay Road and Skenes Creek Road in the Colac–Otway area; Geelong-Portarlington Road in Moolap; Corio–Waurm Ponds Road, known as the Melbourne road, from Broderick Road to Cox Road; Portland-Nelson Road in Mount Richmond; Portarlington–Queenscliff Road in Portarlington; and of course up and down the notorious Great Ocean Road. These areas are known for the safety risks posed on the roads at the best of times, with their unique winding roads and reduced space for full overtaking lanes. Because of this it is essential that the quality of roads in the area be monitored and maintained regularly.

The Safer Local Roads and Streets program allows for more funding to flow to an area like the Great Ocean Road and allows for more works to be done quicker and to a higher quality than we would see without the program. This is what the Allan Labor government offers to the people of Victoria, especially in the regions: safer roads for all Victorians. If you look at eastern Victoria on the map, we are improving safety and efficiency on the Great Alpine Road between Bruthen and Cobungra to provide a smoother and more reliable journey for road users in the area. Some of the works being done across these roads to improve quality and safety include shoulder construction and sealing, pavement repairs, upgrading existing safety barriers and installing new barriers, and finally several line marking improvements and the installation of guide posts, both to improve lane visibility. These improvements are currently underway and are set to be completed next year. Once these roadworks are over locals will be able to enjoy a much safer trip. It will not only be enjoyed by locals; of course the Great Alpine Road is one of the most popular tourist routes of Victoria, rivalling even the Great Ocean Road.

The works will have significantly positive impacts on agriculture in eastern and northern Victoria. Repairs happening have included several important repairs to bridges, which pose their own unique challenges to road maintenance teams. We have replaced the bridge over the Latrobe River on Tyers Road between Traralgon and Tyers, with the installation of barriers and curve works as well as an 80-kilometre speed limit, ensuring increased motorist safety over the bridge. In the northern region of Victoria we are strengthening McCoys Bridge on the Murray Valley Highway over the Goulburn River between Wyuna and Kotupna. McCoys Bridge is a key thoroughfare for the Murray Valley Highway and the surrounding areas. To this end it is essential that McCoys Bridge be maintained and kept at the highest quality a bridge can be. That is exactly what the Allan Labor government has committed to with the strengthening of McCoys Bridge. This essential work will allow this critical transport link to continue to operate for years to come. During the October 2022 floods the bridge was subjected to fast-moving, powerful floodwaters. Unfortunately, the road had to be closed for several weeks to determine if the bridge was damaged and could be safely reopened.

The impacts of natural disasters and extreme weather events are an unfortunate inevitability in our state, and these will impact the quality of our roads as they occur, whether they are flooding events, bushfires or storms. As such, the Allan Labor government recognises the need for regular maintenance programs. We cannot repair a road once and expect it to suffice for decades to come. If we wish to achieve zero road deaths by 2050, we need to implement a continuous plan for road safety, and we most certainly have done so through the *Victorian Road Safety Strategy 2021–2030*, through the safer

local roads and streets program and through comprehensive and numerous maintenance programs that the government has embarked upon throughout the years.

On the topic of northern Victoria, we have also gone to repair sections of the Midland Highway at Mooroopna that required major patching works. Passing by Shepparton, the Midland Highway is an important connecting road for the regional Victoria road network. The Midland Highway passes through major regional cities such as Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo and Shepparton, and it terminates in Mansfield, stretching from the Princes Highway out west to the Maroondah Highway in the east. I am saying this to illustrate just how important the quality of the Midland Highway is. These maintenance works, completed earlier this year, addressed damaged sections of the roads.

These workers have ensured safer roads for northern Victoria, and I am sure everyone in this chamber can appreciate that this is a topic very close to me. As many of you know, I was the secretary of the Transport Workers' Union, Victoria and Tasmania branch, prior to becoming a member of the Legislative Council. Despite coming to the union from the aviation industry, it did not take long to learn just how dangerous the roads can be for transport workers. In 2023 we lost over 200 truck drivers on the road, and this is not acceptable. This is why our government is absolutely dedicated to improving our road safety. Working in the union, I spent years fighting for protections for truck drivers on our roads. For truck drivers, the roads are their office. Every worker should be safe in their place of employment, and in this context this means ensuring that our roads are the best quality they can be. These maintenance blitzes from the Allan Labor government are achieving just that. An investment of \$956 million ensures that everyone who uses the road for personal and professional reasons can be confident they are using safe roads.

As a final point, I would like to acknowledge the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Minister Horne in the other place, for her unwavering commitment to improving Victoria's roads. Minister Horne is undeniably dedicated to her ministerial roles and road safety, and these maintenance programs that our government has implemented are no exception to this commitment. She is the minister that has presided over the regional roads blitz of recent years, and I am confident that with Minister Horne at the helm we can look forward to a Victoria with world-class road networks, regardless of how regional the roads are. Put simply, our Minister for Roads and Road Safety and the Allan Labor government as a whole are delivering on road maintenance and will continue to do so over the years to come.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (16:23): Thank you very much to Mrs Tyrrell from the Northern Victoria Region for bringing this motion to the house. She is quite right that under the Labor government in Victoria we have, she says, some of the worst road conditions – I would say the worst road conditions – in the country. There is no question about it. All the anecdotal evidence from our constituents that come from South Australia or New South Wales tells us how good those roads are. The minute you hit the border and you are across in Victoria, you are likely to do a tyre or a wheel.

We have just heard from Mr Berger, and he has just left unfortunately. He was secretary of the Transport Workers' Union. He said, 'Every worker should be safe' – no, every motorist should be safe. Every child in a school bus should be safe. Every farmer driving their truck or tractor should be safe. Every producer that is carting goods from A to B should be safe. We need everybody to be safe on the roads.

He mentioned wire rope barriers. They are lying wrecked in most places, not repaired. Fortunately, it does not seem that they are rolling out any more of that nonsense, which cost about a billion dollars – a complete waste of money.

Labor has cut \$230 million from road safety programs over the past two years, including a \$150 million reduction in the TAC-funded safe system road infrastructure program and an \$81 million shortfall in the TAC marketing and road safety budget. Do not come in here and talk about road safety expenditure; you have just cut it all. Since 2020 resurfacing and rehabilitation works have plummeted by more 65 per cent on regional roads and funding for road maintenance has dropped by 45 per cent.

Do not talk about fixing roads; you have just stopped doing it. Last year a government survey found – a government survey, mind you – that 91 per cent of roads were in a poor or very poor state. What an indictment.

Labor, under the cover of darkness, has quietly axed Regional Roads Victoria, the agency it set up within VicRoads in 2018 as a dedicated country roads body to make sure regional communities had the safe and reliable roads they deserve – an honourable objective, but they have just ditched it. The organisation is gone. The government has set up a review process – yet another review; they are forever looking in the mirror, this government – to begin the sale of SprayLine Road Surfaces, the last remaining government-owned road maintenance firm. They are selling it off. Labor has skimmed 8.5 per cent, or \$1.57 million, off a federal black spot program funding allocation for project and program management and departmental on-costs. What?

One of my constituents – he writes too many of us, including the minister – Mr Jason Bendeich of Hamilton continually compiles lists. He sent one recently of the top-10 worst roads in south-west Victoria that he travels on regularly. They are the Coleraine-Edenhope Road lower sections closer to Coleraine; the Glenelg Highway between Coleraine and Casterton, one of the worst roads in the state – absolutely deplorable; Glenelg Highway east of Glenthompson, which was promised to be rebuilt in 2018 – we are all still waiting; Maroona-Glenthompson Road between Glenthompson and Maroona, with an emphasis on upper sections between Willaura and Glenthompson; Mackinnons Bridge Road at Noorat to the A1 at Noorat East; Princess Highway, A1, Warrnambool to Port Fairy – it is a disgrace; Princess Highway, A1, between Portland and Heywood; Henty Highway, A200, between Hamilton and Branxholme; Henty Highway, A200, between Hamilton and Cavendish; and the Woolsthorpe-Heywood Road between Heywood and Hawkesdale South. That is only a sample of a few roads that this one constituent has produced a list of.

In May 2023 I brought a roads motion to this place to cause the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to inquire into the state of Victorian roads, and disgracefully it was rejected in this chamber by those on the other side and some of those characters on the crossbench over there. That was appalling, because what it was trying to do was set up an inquiry to recognise the poor state of Victoria's roads, especially in rural and regional areas, and note the consequences of damaged road surfaces, including the safety of all road users and the economic and environmental damage caused by repeated repairs to vehicles such conditions make inevitable. It would have required the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to inquire into, consider and report by February 2024 – of course that never happened – on the state of Victoria's roads, including but not limited to the budgetary resources dedicated to road construction and repairs in Victoria, with comparison to national and international experience; the methods and standards of design, construction and maintenance of road pavement and surfacing, with comparison to national and international experience; and also the value for money achieved by the existing Victorian system of delivering road surface construction and maintenance, including the tendering process, contract requirements including technical specifications of works, quality control and project assessment, the longer term ongoing assessment of road surface quality and the clawback mechanisms for inadequate quality of delivered work. Of course that did not happen, but it should have. We should have had a wholesome inquiry into how we could build roads better so that we do not have to maintain them as we do so regularly.

Given the gravity of the issue, repair costs and roadwork delays but also the lives of people in Victoria, we should have had it. I think everyone in this house will agree, at least those that drive in Victoria and outside the tram tracks, that the condition of our roads is one of the most important things we can spend time and resources debating here. In fact it is probably one of the things that most of us have the most inquiries about. It affects people every day in time lost to roadworks and delays, in repair costs to vehicles and, tragically, in the consequences of the accidents, injuries and deaths which occur all too frequently because of our appalling roads.

Road conditions really matter. Some of you may have heard or read some time ago the 3AW interview in which Victoria Police assistant commissioner, road policing command, Glenn Weir made clear that

the state of the roads was a repeated routine factor investigated by his officers in serious and fatal traffic accidents. Of course there are other causes. But the state of the roads, particularly the collapsed roadsides and verges, is one of the biggest dangers, and reducing speed limits and blaming driver behaviour, this government's favourite tactics, cannot disguise the reality. All of this is despite the fact that Treasurer Pallas told me in a Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing in 2022 that potholes only occur in Liberal Party propaganda. How outrageous.

The subject also deserves scrutiny from a taxpayer value-for-money angle when we consider the vast sums spent on our road network. For local councils across Victoria with hundreds of thousands of kilometres to maintain it is often the biggest line item. At a state level billions are spent on the construction and maintenance of our highways and byways.

In my view we should have had an inquiry. We definitely need one. The design and specification of roads is vitally important, and we need to look at that. As I have outlined, we absolutely need a proper investigation as to how we can have better roads in this state, safer roads, roads that are reliable, roads that do not have to be repaired just a few months after they are repaired and they are built. My toaster has got a better guarantee than most of the roads in Victoria. There seems to be no caveat on contractors to build a road that lasts. They are absolutely shocking, and we need to do something about it. I commend Mrs Tyrrell for the motion, and we should all get behind better roads.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:33): After 10 years of Labor not only do we have record debt, an inadequate healthcare system, a housing crisis and a cost-of-living crisis but also we are seeing roads crumble around us. Roads in Victoria are in a dire state, particularly in regional Victoria. The government's road maintenance budget has been slashed, with \$680 million allocated in 2024–25, which is a 16 per cent decrease from 2020. Despite frequent claims of a maintenance blitz, these efforts are insufficient to address the severely deteriorating roads. The government has blamed, like Mrs Tyrrell said, excessive rainfall and floods for poor road conditions. But this excuse does not hold up when we look at long-term rainfall data across Victoria. Regional roads critical for heavy vehicle transportation have been ranked the worst in the nation. In 2024 only 3 million square metres of roads were resurfaced compared to 9 million square metres in 2022, highlighting the huge decline in infrastructure investment, and poor quality in our roads has a direct impact on safety.

Data from the TAC show 97 deaths on regional roads this year, which is 24 more, tragically, than the same time last year and 11 more than the five-year average. The Australian Road Safety Foundation reports that about two-thirds of national road deaths occur on rural and regional roads. These fatality rates highlight the government's failure to prioritise roads and the safety of regional Victorians. In a move that underscores the government's disregard for regional road safety, Regional Roads Victoria has been disbanded. It is absolutely devastating. Documents obtained under freedom of information reveal that the government diverted \$1.5 million from a federal black spot program that was meant to improve safety on regional roads. This is a tragedy.

In my region Pakenham has experienced a huge population boom over the past decade, but the infrastructure investment has not kept up, and it is beginning to show everywhere. McGregor Road in Pakenham is severely congested, with residents struggling to navigate the area, especially the intersections at Henty Street and Rogers Street, where locals have been calling for traffic lights for a very long time. Residents along with Cardinia council have been campaigning for traffic lights at the Toomuc Valley Road and Princes Highway intersection, which is near the main entrance to Beaconhills College; however, the Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) has stated that it has no plans whatsoever to upgrade this intersection. I was there the other day with some parents from the school after they invited me down to watch the incredible congestion and how people just cannot get across the intersection there. It is becoming more and more dangerous, and they are worried about an accident happening.

Similarly the Lang Lang bypass remains completely unresolved, despite one truck passing through the main street every minute. This poses a significant risk, particularly after and before school, when there

are children around. I know Ms Bath has been down there recently. This is something that they have been campaigning for for a very long time. That road is not made for trucks at the volume they are seeing. A truck driver said to me recently at a community meeting that every morning there are trucks mounting the roundabouts and all of the edges are chipped off because the infrastructure there is not fit for purpose and the sides of the road are crumbling.

In the Mount Dandenong area the high-traffic Mount Dandenong Tourist Road remains neglected, with no upgrade plans despite growing safety concerns. There has been a huge amount of damage and cars are being damaged. In the 2022–23 financial year the DTP received 1532 claims for property damage due to road defects, yet only one claim, worth under \$3000, was paid out. Among the rejected claims was that of 76-year-old Bernard Butler, who sustained over \$3000 worth of car damage on two separate occasions due to the poor conditions of the road. Additionally, a truck company reported that its maintenance costs had risen by one-third due to the deterioration of roads. This is unacceptable.

There was a very interesting road quality survey done recently by the RACV, which I am sure members know about. According to that data 64 per cent of respondents identified poor road quality and potholes as their main concern, up from 46 per cent in 2021. The worst affected roads in the survey included Bass Highway in my region between Jam Jerrup and Leongatha, Great Alpine Road between Bairnsdale and Wangaratta, Princes Highway between Stratford and Bairnsdale, and Phillip Island Road. These areas are just crumbling. I do not want another car damaged, but more importantly, I do not want somebody hurt or a life lost.

The Labor government were elected to serve people, but they seem to have gone on with their pet projects rather than sticking to the core business of what they are meant to do and what they are failing at. It is the state government's responsibility to maintain schools, hospitals, roads, railways, public transport and prisons – all areas which they are absolutely failing in. There are two people across there, and I am sure right now the others are probably out celebrating some other project that nobody asked for while our roads are absolutely crumbling. This government have become so distracted with vanity projects that they have forgotten their core business. I was listening to a speech before, and it seems that sometimes some people in the government see themselves more as philanthropists that are bestowing money on somebody who is very lucky, rather than managing taxpayer dollars to maintain our roads, schools and health care system and do what they are meant to do.

Residents in towns like Traralgon and Moe have been actively campaigning for road improvements to dangerous intersections like Bank Street in Traralgon and the Waterloo Road–Lloyd Street level crossing in Moe. However, progress has been a very slow, and the communities feel really neglected. So I commend Mrs Tyrrell on raising this motion. I hope that the government will stop their self-praise and celebration for a minute and take note of what it really is that Victorians need and what their core business is and return to that. I commend this motion to the house.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:41): I will just say a few words in relation to Mrs Tyrrell's motion 624 on the notice paper today. Certainly as National Party members in Gippsland the state of the roads is not foreign to us. Indeed my colleague and the Shadow Minister for Roads and Road Safety Danny O'Brien has been doing a power of work in this space. Of course not only does it capture media attention, but it is often the most common conversation in our supermarkets, our streets, our pubs and indeed our electorate offices. I commend him for the work he is doing. In fact many of the statistics that we on this side have been reading in and communicating to the house have been because of Danny O'Brien's investigative powers and just actual common sense about things.

One of the points I would like first to put on the record is that in Mrs Tyrrell's motion she made reference to \$675 million in relation to the budget. This is just in effect normal budget maintenance. The government came out a few weeks ago talking about the blitz, and it made it into the papers how important this blitz is. It is just normal budget maintenance funding. There is nothing overly amazing about this. The amazing thing is how the government can stand up in here week after week, month

after month, and make cuts to our budget and cuts to road maintenance. They stand here as if, as we have just heard, they are bestowing some level of kindness.

We know that the Parliamentary Budget Office recently produced a document, and that document was requested by the Leader of the Nationals Peter Walsh. That document very clearly shows that the independent Parliamentary Budget Office forensically analysed infrastructure funding across the state and came to the point that the regional Victorian population is 25 per cent of the overall state population while regional infrastructure spend, again, in this year's budget was 13 per cent of the infrastructure spend. That goes off the back of 12 per cent the previous year and about 13 per cent the year previous to that.

What we are seeing consistently and always is that this Labor government short-changes and shafts regional people. It is very concerning to know and it has often been the case that country people die on country roads, city people die on country roads and country roads are places that are over-represented in deaths on our roads. There has been an increase on last year in deaths on our roads. If you asked anybody in this place or anybody in a supermarket down the street in your home town or region whether they knew somebody in their family circle or friendship circle who died on the roads, I am sure that they would, very sadly, say yes. There are too many people dying on our roads, and it is incumbent on this government to actually take action on that. This government has been in for nine years. This government is continuing to cut road maintenance budgets.

Let us just look at some of the facts, and I will put on record some of the hard work that Mr O'Brien has been doing. Victoria's road maintenance budget remains 16 per cent below what it was in 2020 – a cut. The budget papers reveal that there is a 96 per cent reduction in the level of maintenance undertaken on regional roads in 2023 and 2024. Labor will reduce the area resurfaced or rehabilitated statewide by 75 per cent in the next year compared to two years ago. There is nothing joyful about these statistics; there is only pain, concern, crumbling surfaces and potholes. In 2023–24 the government reduced spending on its resurfacing contracts across the state by 81 per cent, falling from \$200 million to around \$37 million. These are cuts. And why? Because they are pouring the money into the black hole which is the Big Build or those builds in central Melbourne that are siphoning off great loads of taxpayer funds, so we get to pay for it.

Nearly 400 kilometres of roads are speed-reduced – there is a reduction. Rather than fixing the roads, they slap speed-reduced signs on them. There are occasions definitely where there need to be reductions, and we support those. In fact there was one only recently that many in the community near my home town had been calling for, on the south side of Leongatha. It had community consultation. There was nothing majorly wrong with potholes there, but the speed limit needed to be reduced. But where the government is so lazy and so arrogant and so tardy that it cannot be bothered funding road maintenance properly, it just cuts the speed requirements there. It is a gross level of negligence.

We heard also from Mrs Tyrrell that almost 2000 people have lodged claims for vehicle damage due to road surfaces in the past three years. There was a survey by the RACV, and I think there were 7000 people who provided feedback to the RACV. Indeed there are some shockers of roads, and unsurprisingly many of them are in Eastern Victoria Region. I know Dr Heath just read many of them into *Hansard*, so I thank her for doing that. What were the top issues – this is for the RACV investigation and survey. Sixty-four per cent of the participants identified the issue of how safe the roads are. Sixty-four per cent said potholes and road conditions were of top concern; 32 per cent, the dangerous behaviours of other drivers, and that is a whole discussion and a topic on its own, a very important topic; 29 per cent, the narrowing of lanes; and 26 per cent, road intersection safety issues. We heard again that in the Latrobe Valley the Bank Street intersection is still waiting. I can recall raising it in Parliament in about 2016, and they are still waiting. At the time I remember the minister came over and said, 'Look, we've just got a couple of things, and we've got some funding there.' Well, they are still waiting for that, come 2026.

Others in the survey cited limited overtaking opportunities. It is very good that there are suggestions for improvements, and these are not rocket science. Sixty per cent of those people who responded – community members, Victorians – said ‘fix the road surface’. They also said to provide wider shoulders for safety and for water to run off properly, to provide wider lanes and to clear trees and vegetation and other obstructions. Well, drive around anywhere in Gippsland and Eastern Victoria Region and you will see where trees and vegetation are obstructing driver safety and are compromising driver safety. Also of course, in bushfire season they become a wick. We certainly heard that in our inquiry into climate change resilience from the good CFA people in Emerald. They were very concerned about the fact that many of our communities are one road in and one road out and that if there is not that whole-of-road maintenance, including making sure that not only are the edges firm and cleared of detritus and growth but also tree limbs are removed, that can act as a wick.

In conclusion, certainly I support this motion and I support my colleague Danny O’Brien, and I call on the government to have a change of heart and grow a heart and start funding regional roads in the manner which we deserve.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:51): Can I take a moment to thank Mrs Tyrrell for bringing forward this motion for us on this on this Wednesday afternoon. This motion does provide a valuable opportunity to shed light on the extensive work and substantial investments our government is already making to maintain and enhance Victoria’s road infrastructure. As others have mentioned, we will not be supporting this motion because quite simply the work it calls for is work that the government is already doing. We recognise the challenges on our road network, challenges compounded by some of the most severe weather events in recent memory. However, the Allan Labor government is fully committed to addressing these issues and prioritising high-quality repairs where they are needed most.

To illustrate this, just earlier this month we launched our latest road maintenance program. This year alone we are investing an unprecedented \$964 million into road maintenance across Victoria, and this builds on last year’s \$770 million road blitz, which saw over 200,000 potholes fixed, more than 100,000 square metres of road resurfaced and 2600 kilometres of roads treated, nearly 2500 kilometres of which were located in regional Victoria. This year’s investment translates to approximately \$2.6 million being spent every single day between now and mid-2025. These were some statistics and facts that I laid out earlier during the short-form document motion moved by Mrs Deeming. In that I also mentioned that we are directing these funds towards hundreds of kilometres of road rehabilitation, repair and resurfacing projects statewide, ranging from major metropolitan highways to rural roads that our regional communities certainly depend upon.

Our team are already out there on the ground delivering on this commitment. Thousands of individual projects are underway, encompassing not just on-the-road repairs but also vital infrastructure maintenance, including bridges, traffic lights and signage. As the warmer weather arrives Victorians can expect to see more of our crews on the road making their drives safer every day, stronger every day and smoother every day.

Our roads have faced relentless – my goodness, relentless – wear and tear over recent years. The last three years have brought some of the wettest conditions in our state’s history with recurring extreme weather events, including the recent flooding in July. We are not talking just about visible damage either, it is important to note. Consistently wet weather has a profound impact on the integrity of our roads. Water seeps beneath the surface, compromising the road base and complicating repairs, even when surface damage appears minimal.

We recognise that regional roads in particular have been hit hard. Roads in these areas are crucial for keeping communities connected and transporting goods. That is why a significant portion of this funding has gone to, and is going to, regional Victoria. From the Goulburn Valley Highway to the Princes Highway West, from Bacchus Marsh Road to Kilmore Road, our crews are making a difference, ensuring Victorians can travel with peace of mind. As I mentioned earlier, and I will say it

again, the flood inquiry work that many of us on the Environment and Planning Committee were fortunate to be part of highlighted really the vast damage that has been done to our roads by more intense and frequent rain as a result of climate change.

It is just the beginning, and I will refer back to perhaps the statistics I gave earlier. I understand, however, that there is limited time and that in this chamber there are a couple of members from regional Victoria that want to make contributions about their electorates and the impacts on regional roads in their electorates. I know that both Mr McCracken and of course Ms Lovell are representatives of regional Victoria and do want to make contributions, so I will leave my remarks there.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (16:55): I rise to speak on Mrs Tyrrell's motion, and I thank her for bringing it to the house. As Mrs Tyrrell said, this is the single biggest issue that we face in our offices. We have people in every day. We have emails every day. We have phone calls every day from someone else who has travelled on a road that they consider to be substandard. In Northern Victoria we have two sayings. Mrs Tyrrell outlined one, which is that we are required to have cars that are roadworthy but the roads are not required to be carworthy. The other saying that we have we borrowed from Mr McCracken, who I think coined it when he said that we no longer drive on the left of the road, we drive on what is left of the road. That is precisely what we do in Northern Victoria.

I think the state of the road is highlighted by the fact that last year, in 2023, we had a 15-year high for the road toll for lives lost on roads in regional Victoria. Last year there were 295 lives lost, and that was a 15-year high. This year to today, 30 October, there have actually been 233 lives lost, but last year at this point in time there were 236. So we are three less than last year, but we are actually on track to have another record loss of life on Victorian roads, because in that 236 from last year we had three accidents in our electorate that you could not contribute to the condition of the roads. In those three accidents alone there were 14 lives lost. There were five lost at Labuan Road, which I guess you could attribute to the condition of the road because of the lack of line of sight, but it was driver error through that major intersection that caused those five lives to be lost. In Daylesford we had five lives lost, and again that was a medical incident for the driver and a very tragic accident there. In Chiltern there were four lives lost; again that was driver error. And we had another four lives lost up in Mansfield. So 18 lives were lost in four accidents, but the initial 14 that I spoke of, on Labuan Road and in Daylesford and Chiltern, you would not really put down to the condition of the road. So I think that really we are probably ahead of schedule this year, unfortunately, to have another record number of lives lost in Victoria.

The government have been crowing about their investment to fix Victorian roads, but it is not going to fix Victorian roads. We know that is just the general maintenance budget. In fact in the 11 electorates in my region, four of them do not have a single road that will get any maintenance out of that project. Those are Bendigo East, the Premier's electorate; Bendigo West, the Speaker's electorate; Murray Plains; and Eildon. There is not a single road in any of those electorates that is actually on the list for maintenance. In fact there are less than 32 kilometres of roads right across the whole of Northern Victoria that will actually see any treatment done to them.

I guess the real disappointment of course is in the Eildon electorate, where the Melba Highway, which was deemed to be the worst road in Victoria according to the RACV survey, is not getting any maintenance. This is despite the minister, Minister Horne, standing in front of the TV cameras when she announced this maintenance blitz saying the Melba Highway would be repaired. When you look at the Regional Roads Victoria list, the Melba Highway is actually not there. The list that was given to the media also included a section of the Midland Highway between Tatura and Shepparton as going to be repaired. It is also not on the Regional Roads Victoria website. When the media went back to Regional Roads Victoria, they confirmed that neither the Melba Highway nor the Midland Highway from Tatura to Shepparton will be upgraded under this so-called blitz that the government is undertaking.

In the Yan Yean electorate, where people are really crying out for improvements to Donnybrook Road, to Yan Yean Road and to a number of roads, there is only 290 metres of road that is actually going to get any maintenance done under this roads blitz. In the Shepparton electorate it is 1.4 kilometres, in Benambra electorate 1.36 kilometres, in Ovens Valley 1.59 kilometres. Euroa is doing a little bit better with 8.4 kilometres and Mildura 4.9 kilometres. It seems that Macedon is the one that will get the most roads upgraded in my electorate, but again it is only 13½ kilometres of roads that will see any treatment. I have recently done a survey of my electorate for roads that need to be upgraded, and the people out there that use the roads can certainly tell you which roads need upgrading. We have had hundreds of responses to our survey, and they will give us roads to raise with this government for many weeks to come in the Parliament.

The state of our roads is absolutely disgraceful. They are unsafe. I talked before about the deaths last year, and there is one particular accident that I want to mention because this accident was probably the last death we had in the electorate of Shepparton last year. It was a tragic death on 31 December. I think it was about 7:30 at night. A motorcycle hit a pothole on the Barmah-Shepparton Road at Kaarimba, and the lady who was riding that motorcycle was thrown off the motorcycle and landed on her head. That pothole covered the entire width of the carriageway of the road. She had no way of avoiding it. There was very little signage leading up to it to say that the pothole was there. In fact people say where the signage was located it was too late to avoid it. Her partner was following her in the car, and he saw her hit the road. She landed on her head and then the motorcycle landed on her. He immediately rushed to her and he held her in his arms, but unfortunately she died before the ambulance arrived 28 minutes later. That was a tragic way to end the year for us in the Shepparton electorate.

We certainly do not want to be ending this year the same way. We want the government to invest in our roads. The main road that I am getting in the Shepparton area at the moment is the Congupna–Katamatite road. It is an absolute shocker. But there are so many roads, particularly in Yan Yean and Macedon, that people are putting up that need to be repaired and maintained, and I urge this government to spend more on roads in regional Victoria.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (17:04): I rise to fully support this motion from Mrs Tyrrell, and I congratulate her on putting on the record once again the awful state of roads in country Victoria. Part 1 of the motion recognises that under the Allan Labor government Victoria has some of the worst road conditions in the country. This is completely true. It is backed by anecdotal evidence from constituents I see every week, and I know many other people have those constituents reporting to them as well.

In my area the Western Highway is in a poor state of repair. Works are done in one area and then another crumbles, and when works continue, the area that was just worked on then crumbles. There have been a lot of instances of that. The Princes Highway, which is also in my electorate, has notorious areas, especially west of Colac. You just hope that you have got great suspension and great car insurance, because you need them both, which is a great shame because it causes significant financial impost to people that just want to travel on a road. It is a very, very basic thing. The Midland Highway, which goes in particular from Ballarat to Geelong, south of Ballarat heading towards Geelong has some of the more terrible pieces of road, especially near the small township of Meredith. Locals have reported damage to vehicles, and much of the damage does not fall within the scope of the VicRoads compensation scheme, so again locals are forced to traverse roads that cause significant damage to vehicles. We are not just talking cars here; we are talking trucks, we are talking caravans, we are talking road bikes – if the Greens were in here, they might be worried about that as well. We are talking about tankers, semitrailers – all sorts of vehicles that incur damage because of the state of the roads. That places a significant concern on safety and risk, because we do not want people driving off roads but we also want people to stay incredibly safe on our road network.

That brings me to part (2) of this motion, the failure to repair roads in a timely manner causing Victoria's road network to crumble. When friends of mine come from interstate, one of the first things

they comment on is the state of roads. If you come via road, obviously you come from New South Wales or South Australia. It is one of the first things they say: ‘Why are your roads so bad in Victoria?’ The answer is pretty obvious – they are not a priority. I have many constituents who regularly update me on the state of roads in their local community as well. A constituent of mine, Jason, who lives near Coleraine, has sent me photographs of the deplorable condition of the Glenelg Highway between Coleraine and Casterton. You would not believe this, but there is a stretch of 27 kilometres which he says is extremely difficult and challenging to drive on. We are talking potholes, we are talking big cracks in the road – 27 kilometres of this. Imagine if that was in the city; it would be fixed in a heartbeat. But not country Victoria. Why? You have to ask the question. Another local, John, who spoke to me – he lives near Beaufort – said the stretch of road between there and Trawalla on the Western Highway has had constant roadworks, and as he said, it seems to have been on and off for years but without any improvement to the surface condition and drivability. Locals say to me that they are saying this to government MPs as well, but clearly there is not anyone listening. You would have to conclude that they do not particularly care.

Point (3) and point (4) of Mrs Tyrrell’s motion deal with the roads blitz that was recently announced by the state government. We know it is not entirely true to call it a roads blitz unless you want to call it a media blitz, because that is probably more what it actually is, because the funding, which is basically maintenance funding coupled with some flood recovery funding, was budgeted for in the last state budget. There is no new money in this at all. Maybe the blitz is in advertising and pamphlets, not in actual roadwork being done. There is nothing for upgrades, nothing for new roads. This is just maintenance money. But I do have to give credit to those opposite for creativity. It is a great way to spin a story. The \$675 million spend in regional Victoria, which equates to around 70 per cent of the entire fund, is down 16 per cent on 2020 levels. So let us not pretend that there is an increase in funding at all; there is actually a decrease. Is this due to financial mismanagement? Or maybe country people just are not a priority. This blitz, which occurs annually at the start of the spring works, seems to be the only period of time that significant roadworks actually occur. I would have to ask why this is the case.

Look at other jurisdictions around the world. If you look at the USA, they have got a very varied climate. They have snow, they have got arid parts. They are able to build concrete roads that last a long time. You have to ask: why can’t we do that here in Australia? Why can’t we build something that actually lasts for the long term instead of having to continually and very expensively work on our country roads? In Canada a large proportion of their country is coated with snow. Their roads are exceptional, and they have a very large, diverse, dispersed population as well, very similar to Australia. If the Canadians can do it, why can’t we? What about European nations? Cyprus, Türkiye, Greece, Spain and Portugal are all countries with warmer climates. They all have excellent roads. Why can’t we learn from these jurisdictions about how to build roads in different sets of climates with varying conditions?

I would like to acknowledge the hard work of the shadow minister Mr Danny O’Brien in the other place for bringing attention to this and also the shadow parliamentary secretary for roads Bev McArthur because they have been tireless in their advocacy for country roads for a long, long time. I again congratulate Mrs Tyrrell on her work to bring this motion to the chamber. I am not sure how this vote will go, but I hope that the government, whatever happens, actively listens to the very important issue that she has raised, and I hope that they think about the poor country voters in our electorates. I know you are a country MP too, Mrs Tyrrell. I hope that they actually listen to country MPs and country constituents instead of focusing all their money on city projects that really do not drive much of a benefit for country people like you, me and everyone else.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (17:11): I would like to thank everyone for their contributions today. The condition of Victorian roads has been plaguing regional Victorians for many years. While Victorians were relieved to hear the announcement of the roads blitz by the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, they remain very sceptical.

For too long my constituents have watched roads be patched, resealed and supposedly fixed, only to see potholes reform, cracks reopen and rough surfaces reappear in a matter of weeks, if not days. The government must be held accountable for this. All this spending on roads seems to be wasted money if the job is not done right the first time. The contracts awarded to road maintenance companies must be seriously looked at. The quality of their work and the cost to do said work must be taken into consideration when offering contracts for this roads blitz. It seems too many contractors are being rewarded for subpar work with renewed contracts.

This state is so far in debt our great-grandchildren will still be paying it off, so it makes financial sense to ensure contracts are awarded to companies that do quality and lasting work to our roads that goes the distance and is weatherproof, durable and load bearing. Our taxpayers, road users and visiting interstate motorists deserve far better than what this government is currently providing. Believe it or not, I actually have faith that the government can do the right thing by Victorians. It is whether or not they choose to do the right thing that will be the decider.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (17): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (17): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Country Fire Authority

Report 2022–23

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (17:19): I rise to deliver a statement on the Country Fire Authority's 2022–23 annual report. I see that the minister is very excited about that, because this report is something worth celebrating. I am going to speak today in anticipation of the CFA's forthcoming 2023–24 annual report. I do this because I know that the CFA's invaluable work with our community as outlined in the 2022–23 report will only go from strength to strength in subsequent reports thanks to the consistent investments from the Allan Labor government and the Minister for Emergency Services, who I have the very distinct pleasure of working with.

I visited CFA headquarters in Burwood East just last week, and I sat down to talk with the CFA's interim CEO Robyn Harris. Unfortunately the chief officer Jason Heffernan had been called away on an urgent engagement. I hope that all went well out there in the community and I look forward to meeting with him soon. What struck me most about my conversation with Ms Harris and her team is just how highly esteemed CFA volunteers are both within the CFA's work culture and the broader community.

It is no wonder that since June last year the CFA has received close to 7000 new volunteer applications – congratulations to each and every one of you. They have worked incredibly hard to maintain a really dedicated pool of over 51,000 hardworking and committed volunteers. It fills me with great pride to see that even in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis Victorians are still lining up to donate their labour to their communities through the CFA, and our government is making sure that investment in CFA equipment keeps up with volunteers' needs. This year's budget has committed \$18.6 million to deliver 15 replacement urban response pumpers to the CFA. The CFA is also rolling out 48 heavy tankers and two light tankers funded as part of our \$126 million CFA capability package. The heavy tankers, let me just say, have recently been delivered to Mildura, Ballan, Creswick,

Daylesford, Miners Rest, Wendouree and many other brigades across the state. Buying new trucks is not all we are doing. We are also investing \$11 million to upskill CFA firefighters and deliver volunteer driver training and licensing, which includes a delivery of dedicated training trucks – how good is that! That is outlined in the annual report. I have got to say I am pretty stoked about this one.

The CFA raised \$1.6 million for sick children through the Good Friday Appeal. This is a figure that fills me with pride, knowing that even when times are tough for every household in the state Victorians dig deep for their communities. The report details how CFA members assisted communities by preparing them for and keeping them safe throughout extreme climate events like bushfires and floods, which are really only made worse by the effects of climate change. I know from my time serving on the 2022 flood inquiry that CFA volunteers saved lives during that event, and this report highlights the exemplary service of volunteers during that really difficult time.

The report also highlights how the CFA is diversifying its membership through the diversity and inclusion strategy it launched in 2023. We have developed an inclusive language guide for members and also implemented a women in leadership mentoring program to create a really clear path for women to become volunteer leaders. I was particularly interested, on the diversity and inclusion theme, to see in the report a case study of the Swan Hill brigade, who have embraced the Fijian community, which has grown in Swan Hill over recent years. Six volunteers from Fiji who originally came to Swan Hill as abattoir workers now contribute to the brigade. These volunteers saw the images on the telly when the 2009 Black Saturday fires were broadcast on TVs across the Pacific. When they came to Australia they wanted to give back to the community, and those who heroically fought those fires, as CFA volunteers – how incredible is that! It is worthy of celebration. I have said a number of times here today, and it bears repeating at least once more but probably more than that: I could not be more proud of the way Victorians from all walks of life come together for their communities and to contribute to incredible organisations like the CFA. Their focus on equity and diversity is something that resonates with this side of the house.

Just last month I joined with others to really celebrate diversity in representation of our party, but do you know what? I know that the upcoming report is something that we will be looking forward to reading as I hope it outlines the work we are doing to continue to build stronger community emergency response structures.

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis in Victoria

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:25): I rise to speak on the Victorian government response to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee report on the inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria. I am particularly interested in recommendation 4, about a definition which is under review. I would like to understand if the government has some sort of timeline for ‘under review’. Recommendation 4 is:

That the Victorian Government set a consistent and clear definition of ‘affordable housing’ in legislation that is required to be adopted across all government departments, policy and agreements with the private sector.

‘Under review’ is pending a decision on a nationally consistent definition. The Planning and Environment Act 1987 defines ‘affordable housing’, and this definition is used consistently across all policy and planning permit negotiations.

In November 2023 a Housing and Homelessness Ministerial Council meeting called for an analysis to enable ministers to determine if a single national definition of ‘affordable housing’ could be agreed. There were four key focus areas which were agreed and proposed to be completed within a timeframe to enable ministers to form a view about a single national definition by 30 June 2024. However, this has now been put on hold, and many states and territories have broadly similar approaches. There is significant variation between the states and the territories in their implementation of a definition and the role that it plays when it comes to affordable housing in the housing system.

While I understand that there are issues about a definition Australia-wide, I do believe that this has been an issue long enough and that this issue is important enough in this state that it needs to be resolved. In my electorate of South-Eastern Metropolitan Region homelessness and the cost of living are the number one issues, and these issues are number one to many Victorians. In fact according to the Council to Homeless Persons:

After hitting a record high a year ago, Victoria's rents have since grown another 15 per cent. People already finding it tough to pay the rent are now finding it impossible. Under-pressure homelessness services are seeing an alarming rise in new clients who have never struggled in the past.

Working people seeking homelessness assistance grew 14 per cent across the state last year.

In fact I have heard of people in my region who are sleeping in their cars and then having to get up to go to work, looking for places to have showers, finding people that can help them out and still maintaining a way to keep their job. This is a really distressing thing to discover, and I do not think that this government is doing enough about it. Meanwhile it cannot even yet work out a definition that is consistent about what it means to have affordable housing.

Homelessness services working with employed people increased in 61 of Victoria's 80 local government areas between 2020 and 2021 during the COVID era and again increased in 2022 and 2023. Employed people now make up one in eight homelessness service users in Victoria. In fact 12,146 employed people sought homelessness assistance last year.

We know that children and young people make up a huge proportion of Victoria's worsening homelessness crisis. A 26 per cent increase has taken place between 2016 and 2021. According to our last census in 2021 a total of 6798 children were estimated to be experiencing homelessness, which accounts for 22 per cent of the state's overall homelessness numbers, and more than 4100 are children under the age of 12. I want to say that one more time: at least 4100 children under the age of 12 are considered to be homeless and requiring assistance. So the issue of affordable housing and figuring out what that means here in this state and across the country is incredibly important. This is a terribly frightening statistic. In fact no civilised country should accept a statistic like this.

The instability of a proper home creates a myriad of larger issues, such as a higher risk of poor educational outcomes and general mental health issues, and we are seeing this consistently in Victoria. According to the Launch Housing impact report of 2022–23, children fall through the gaps of the education system because of their frequent relocations. Over time this increases the risk of experiencing homelessness as an adult. In Greater Dandenong more than 2000 people are homeless. In fact I really struggle to understand how we have so many people that have been brought into this country and then left to sleep in the streets or to have shopping carts, even out near my office. It really distresses me to think that we are not doing enough for people and that we are creating more and more homelessness.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Inquiry into Vaping and Tobacco Controls

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:30): I rise to speak on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee report on vaping and tobacco controls. I am quite critical of some of the findings and recommendations of this report, but I want to be very clear before I speak that this is not a reflection of the work of the committee staff.

This is a very strange report. It seems to exist in some kind of parallel universe where the United Kingdom, New Zealand and any other jurisdiction that has something approximating sensible policies on vaping just do not exist. Indeed the word 'England' does not appear in the report at all, despite Public Health England conducting regular reviews on the evidence of vaping. It is maybe not surprising then that finding 15 states that:

There is no scientific evidence to show that e-cigarette use is healthier than smoking tobacco.

None – no evidence at all, apparently. It is quite odd then when you go to vapingfacts.health.nz, an official website of the New Zealand health department, that there is a range of evidence cited. When you click through the tab on ‘The facts of vaping’ the first point states:

Vaping can give nicotine in a less harmful way than cigarettes.

They also cite a lot of research, including a 2021 Cochrane review and an evidence review of e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products by Public Health England, amongst others.

But according to this committee, none of this actually exists. Apparently the previous and current New Zealand and United Kingdom governments are basing their public policy on, well, absolutely nothing, because no evidence exists, apparently, that vaping is less harmful than smoking.

Finding 8 states that the overall tobacco market in Victoria is estimated at \$6 billion, with estimates of between 6.1 per cent and 40 per cent of that being illicit tobacco. It also states that the vape market is estimated to be worth between \$332 million and \$545.8 million. I would suggest that both of these are an underestimate.

One thing that I think we can all agree on is that we are seeing a slow-rolling policy disaster. Where we disagree is on some of the causes and most certainly on the solutions. The causes are obvious, or at least they should be. The surging and increasingly violent and dangerous illicit tobacco market is clearly driven by excessive tobacco excise taxes supported, at least until very recently, by all major parties. These have created an incentive for organised crime to make huge profits from illicit tobacco smuggling. With vaping, there has been a complete failure to establish a reasonably regulated industry for adults to allow them to quit smoking by what is clearly a less harmful alternative.

One other area in which I would at least partially agree with the findings of the committee is that youth vaping is an issue. For smokers who are struggling to quit, vaping is a great alternative, as acknowledged and promoted by the New Zealand health department. But for teenagers who have never smoked it is a habit worth avoiding, as it is clearly more harmful than breathing fresh air and nicotine dependence is worth avoiding. However, the way that we have approached this, in particular organisations like VicHealth, has been completely wrongheaded. In 2019 in this chamber I referenced the work of Dr Stephen Bright, a senior lecturer in addiction studies at Edith Cowan University. In 2013 he was the lead author in a study that looked at drug moral panics in the media and how they interacted with consumer behaviour. The key finding of this work was that moral panics like the one we have seen with youth vaping tend to lead to an increase in curiosity and experimentation rather than discouraging use. In short, much of the nonsense we have seen from public health has simply been advertising the exact behaviour they are trying to address. I warned about this very phenomenon in 2019, and that is exactly what we have seen play out.

But I have some good news. It does, however, require looking outside the bubble of Australia and learning about what has happened overseas. The news is that after a similar panic about youth vaping in the United States, vaping rates among young people have fallen dramatically in recent times. It was just a fad. It was trendy for a while and then it became lame and cringe, as often happens with periods of youth experimentation, and this would likely happen here too. What would speed up this process is embracing adult vaping – indeed embracing tobacco harm reduction overall. If it is a boring thing recommended by the government to help your granddad quit the cigarettes, it will hardly be an edgy and cool thing for teenagers to do. We need to cut the tobacco excise and legalise vaping for adults. This is how we will get organised crime under control and respect the choices of adults.

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:35): I rise today to make a statement on the report from the inquiry into the state education system in Victoria by the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, which was tabled on 15 October. As deputy chair of that inquiry, it was

a great opportunity to be out – and I know many other members of the committee are in the chamber today – spending time in Melbourne and also in regional Victoria talking to a wide range of people about our education system. It is very clear that Victoria is indeed the Education State, home to some of the best schools in the nation. We have got some of the highest attendance rates for government schools in the nation, and I am proud to have a large number of great schools in the Southern Metropolitan Region. I was recently down at Beaumaris Primary School talking to the new principal David Tapp about the work that he is doing in his school to help better support that school and the students there to improve their teaching and learning outcomes. I heard about the scaffolding that he is putting in and the evidence- and data-led approach he is taking, the explicit approach that he is taking to teaching and learning in that school, and I think it has got great years ahead.

What the inquiry found and what the report shows is that overall Victorian schools, particularly in literacy, are doing particularly well. We are a top performer nationally in reading and writing, and the performance of our students in literacy has consistently improved since 2015, with Victorian primary school students achieving nation-leading results in reading and writing. Whilst we do have NAPLAN results that overall are at the top, benchmarked around the country, they also show that there are students within that that need extra help. Many, particularly those from some marginalised and disadvantaged groups, need extra support. Currently about 25 per cent of students require further help in reading and literacy, and around 30 per cent of Victorian students are not proficient, according to the evidence that was presented to us.

That is why during the course of the inquiry I was very pleased, and I think my fellow members of the committee welcomed it in the final report, that the Minister for Education and Deputy Premier announced that the state government was introducing the rollout of a consistent approach to the teaching of structured synthetic phonics in Victoria's primary schools. We had such strong evidence before the parliamentary inquiry, replicated in this report, that the best way to teach kids reading is through an explicit structured synthetic phonics-based approach, teaching kids how to decode, spell and comprehend, not just guess based on pictures or context. That was the evidence the committee heard. The minister has announced that we are going to roll that approach out to all Victorian government schools starting from next year.

But of course we cannot expect major change to happen without guidance and support, and so that is what the state government is doing – supporting the rollout of this new phonics approach in our schools. Structured support will help that transition for students but also more importantly help teachers address those workloads. The minister has recently announced the Phonics Plus program, which includes the first round of lesson plans that include 25 minutes of daily explicit phonics, as laid out earlier this year. This program has been developed in consultation with teachers and school leaders and is a comprehensive resource package which includes teaching on handwriting fluency and dictation and will make it easier for schools to implement the new approach. It will provide more support to our teachers to make sure that what we are delivering to our students will help retain Victoria's position as a leader in literacy in the country and deliver the best outcomes for our children.

Last week the minister, the Deputy Premier, was at the Victorian Council of Social Service announcing a refreshed vision for the Education State that puts excellence in every school at its core. This Labor government is a passionate supporter of our government schools and a passionate supporter of improving outcomes in our education system. The future is very bright in Victoria's government schools.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2024–25

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:40): I rise to speak on the state budget papers and specifically in regard to the funding allocation for programs to do with the housing statement. Up-front we still have not got to the 80,000 homes a year that were promised in several government media announcements and 17 or 18 times in *Hansard* by several members in this chamber. I know

Mr McIntosh repeated it a couple of times, and it was said three times at least by the Minister for Housing – that they would deliver 80,000 homes each and every year for 10 years.

We saw a little stunt today from my friends across the way mentioning me and my views on housing, but I would like to take people like Mr Galea and Mr McIntosh for a walk down memory lane so they can understand what their government has done in regard to development. One of those is to do with Carnegie. I want to point out Steve Dimopoulos, the member for Oakleigh. We are getting called blockers. You would think a member of cabinet would not be a blocker, would you? I was surprised to see the member for Oakleigh talking so negatively about the Carnegie activity zone that we bought in. He then apparently advocated for and introduced two-storey height limits in Carnegie, only for it to reemerge as an activity zone about seven years later. If you want to talk about who slowed development, it is literally the Labor Party. It is just like the Preston activity zone: we put it forward – ‘This is a great place for growth’ – Labor scrapped it and then came up with their own Preston activity centre.

Let us remind those opposite also of the changes they made. I was reading through the contributions made in 2015 on the, wait for the name, Planning and Environment Amendment (Recognising Objectors) Bill 2015. We had Mr Brooks, who is the member for Bundoora and Minister for Development Victoria and who is calling everyone blockers, saying it was so important to talk to residents who were impacted and listen to them. Residents were ‘good people who just want a fair go’. ‘Transparency is a key thing,’ and there was a need to be ‘mindful’ of residents’ voices. We also had the member for –

Michael Galea: On a point of order, President, a point of clarification: does this now mean that Mr Mulholland’s Liberal Party is no longer opposing activity centre developments?

The PRESIDENT: That is not a point of order.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Mr Dimopoulos said that the Carnegie activity zone was a honey pot for developers and that a building like the one in Carnegie in the City of Glen Eira was ‘entirely inappropriate’ – again, a blocker who is singing in cabinet. Richard Wynne was for mandatory height limits in places like Brunswick while Jacinta Allan was sitting around the cabinet table. Let us not forget that the current Premier, who claims that she is in the ‘fight of her life’ for housing, sat around the cabinet table when they introduced the Planning Environment Amendment (Recognising Objectors) Bill 2015, giving more weight to residents who she now calls blockers. She is in the fight of her life on housing – how pathetic, what a hypocrite. Seriously, you have got the Premier claiming this is now an issue but she sat idly by and did nothing while this government opposed developments in places like Preston, in places like Brunswick and in places like North Fitzroy.

You have got government member after member. Who else spoke on it? Mary-Anne Thomas. Jaclyn Symes also saw the need for communities to be involved in the planning process, and of course Ms Kilkenny, to give local communities a voice. If you want an answer to the people who caused the housing crisis – hypocrisy, thy name is Labor.

Legalise Cannabis Victoria

Consultation Report: Medicinal Cannabis and Driving in Victoria – An Interim Proposal for Law Reform

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (17:45): In July we received the agreement of the Legislative Council to undertake consultation into our proposal to allow judicial discretion for medicinal cannabis prescription holders who are charged with the presence of drugs in their system if they hold a current prescription and were unimpaired when tested. Arising from that resolution of the Council, we engaged the eminent Tony Parsons, former supervising magistrate of the Drug Court of Victoria, to undertake a series of consultations. Mr Parsons consulted with representatives from the

judiciary, law enforcement, the legal community and the medical and social sectors and with policymakers. The report provides a balanced view of the stakeholders consulted.

We are pleased to report that whilst there were some reservations, the majority of stakeholders expressed strong support for addressing the inequity faced by those Victorians who take legally prescribed medicinal cannabis but face punitive sanctions if they return a positive result at a roadside test. Stakeholders by and large backed our proposal for an interim solution. Indeed many expressed bemusement and even shock over the current regime, with one legal expert observing:

[It] is an odd situation to have a legal right (to take prescribed medicinal cannabis) then if you comply strictly with the obligations that come with that legal right, you can still be guilty of an offence.

Regrettably the Chief Commissioner of Police chose not to participate when invited, but he made the following comments on ABC radio, and I quote:

Our position is simple, they are matters for government. While it's against the law to drive with cannabis in your system we'll continue to enforce it.

These comments are noted in the report. Medicinal cannabis remains the only prescribed medication that is not subject to judicial discretion. To quote Mr Parsons:

The legal framework that applies to medicinal cannabis patients is, accordingly, grossly discriminatory ...

So we say this situation needs to be remedied immediately.

Mr Parsons was ably assisted by Dr Hamish McIntosh in the production of this report. On behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria, I extend my gratitude to Mr Parsons and Dr McIntosh for their invaluable contribution to this debate. It is our hope that the government considers the report and implements its recommendations to amend the Road Safety Act 1986 to give the courts discretion to decide the issue of orders against drivers licences for medicinal cannabis patients. I commend the report to the house.

Department of the Legislative Council

Report 2023–24

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:48): I rise to speak on a report that has just been tabled in this place, the annual report of the Department of the Legislative Council. In doing so I will take a brief opportunity to again acknowledge –

David Davis interjected.

Michael GALEA: A cure for insomnia, did you say?

David Davis: The report.

Michael GALEA: I thought the Legislative Council was a cure for insomnia, Mr Davis, perhaps some of our late-night committee-of-the-whole sessions. I know I for one find this place invigorating at all times of day, as I am sure you do too, Mr Davis. We all do have the great privilege of being in this place, whether for a long time or a short time, to passionately represent the views of our constituents and our values and our beliefs. It is a great privilege to be here to do that, and in doing so we are very, very well enabled by the incredible staff of the department, two of whom I see in front of me here in the chamber and many others who work in various support roles – clerking roles and tabling office roles as well as attendants – and indeed staff covered under the Department of Parliamentary Service, such as those poor long-suffering people who have to listen to us through the broadcast and transcribe everything that we say for *Hansard*.

It is a very special privilege, as I say, to be here. It has been quite a big year, as the report clearly shows. We had a resignation from the Council in the past 12 months, with the good Dr Bach driving, as Charli XCX might say, to the airport, to the airport, to the airport to get away from the dysfunction that is the Victorian Liberal Party. We did indeed see a new member come in as part of that. I know that very much for many of us in the chamber we greatly miss the good Dr Bach and his quirky and

eclectic and often entertaining contributions in this place as well as his detailed knowledge of his brief, which is something that we are certainly feeling the loss of now from those members opposite. But while we might miss the good doctor, I was very surprised to hear Mr Davis himself in fact today make some rather disparaging remarks about Dr Bach, which I was very, very disappointed to hear. I am sure that the good Dr Bach will be disappointed to hear one of his former colleagues talking him down so much and running him down, which is, sadly, just so typical of what we see: the chaos and the dysfunction and the disunity. We heard a motion read into the chamber earlier this morning about team building. I think Dr Heath made the reference that Labor MPs enjoy getting together to team build. Well, that may be the case, but something that the Liberal Party certainly could do with a little bit more of is some team building. I am sure that my good colleagues in the National Party, who are shackled to these people, would no doubt agree with me on that.

Melina Bath: Is this a cheerio?

Michael GALEA: It is a cheerio for you, Ms Bath, because I am speaking the silent cries that you cannot about the dysfunction of your coalition partner that you have to endure day after day, week after week. Who is the leader? Is it going to be Mr Wells, the member Rowville? Is it going to be Mr Crewther, the member for Mornington? Mr Battin, perhaps? In fact I think every member of my region who is in the Liberal Party is running for the Liberal leadership at this stage.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, this is an opportunity, this section of proceedings on a Wednesday, to deal with government reports. It is not an opportunity to deal with a general attack on the opposition, personnel, individuals and so forth without any context beyond the Legislative Council committee report.

The PRESIDENT: I am not too sure about the attack on any individual party, but I think, Mr Davis, if you had said relevance, I probably would have upheld that. I will call Mr Galea back to the report.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, on relevance.

The PRESIDENT: I 100 per cent uphold Ms Bath's point of order. I will call Mr Galea back to the report.

Michael GALEA: I thank you, President, as indeed I thank Mr Davis for allowing me to continue for so long before his point of order as well. There are very many other things that we do get done in this department, in this chamber. I do note as well – taking up Ms Bath's interjection from just before – with regard to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association there will be some things in the report I dare say for next year, such as when Ms Lovell and I were in Tuvalu at the start of the financial year, and indeed a few of us will be in Sydney shortly for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, which will be good to see on Australian shores as well. So there are very many things, and once again I express my very big appreciation of and thankyou to the amazing staff, who very patiently put up with all of us and allow us to do what we do in this place.

Petitions

Inverloch surf beach

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:53): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

I am pleased to rise to speak to the petition that gained 2575 signatures in a short space of four days, showing how active and agitated the community is about this very important issue. The surf lifesaving club is at imminent risk. The September storms saw the surf come within 10 metres of the clubhouse, and the fortifying sandbags in front shifted and are under stress and compromised. But of course when the new clubhouse was built in 2010, you could not see the beach. The clubhouse was over 80 metres back from the shoreline. Only days earlier the Allan government released its draft cape-to-cape

resilience plan which ultimately, when you drill down into the bottom of it, says, ‘We will do nothing until 2040 and then the practice, the adaptation, will be to retreat.’ Clearly to retreat would mean not only the loss of the surf lifesaving club but also the loss of the footpath at the side. It could potentially mean the loss of the road at the back and then people’s homes.

As I said, in just a short space of time the community rallied, and I would certainly like to congratulate the Inverloch Surf Life Saving Club president Glenn Arnold, Maya Arnold for her work, treasurer Stephen Duncan and members of that fantastic club that is so supportive not only of community but of safety and beach safety and in encouraging tourism to that region, but also the Inverloch Tourism Association (ITA) and other members who rallied in that short space of time.

Coastal erosion is not a new phenomenon. It is a vexed situation and I am not saying that this is an easy solve, but this government is now putting its head into the sand and that sand is literally eroding away. In the space of six years the dunes have receded 70 metres, and what has the government been doing in this time? Labor has been in during this time. What have they been doing? Well, in 2022 they produced the coastal hazard assessment, and when you drill down, it offers two parts. One is intervention, which includes sand nourishment – nothing wrong with that as a start – and hard engineering solutions that I will not have time to go into in detail. The second pathway was about retreat – sand management and retreat. The cape-to-cape resilience project has been in circulation for about four years, with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action as the lead agency of seven government agencies. Recently they finally met with the club, with the ITA and with the South Gippsland Conservation Society, and that was generated from friction born from this petition. Again I commend the community – 2575 signatures. These people are agitated about this, and they are calling for intervention and engineering solutions and to save the club and the private assets along that surf beach.

After a four-year period the government hired external consultants. They really investigated this, but some of the investigations were Post-it notes and push polling. They did not ask the community, ‘Do you wholly and solely agree with retreat?’ And there were limited people – far, far less than these 2500 people. Overwhelmingly the cape-to-cape resilience project is seen to be a frustration to certainly the members of the surf life saving club. Indeed Stephen Duncan told our recent committee that their representative withdrew due to extreme frustration and the lack of urgency. And now Labor is talking about this renourishment program – \$3.3 million provided by the federal government. Well, indeed that could come in four years when the overseas dredger is available. The community cannot wait on the never-never for action, and I certainly understand that this government needs to listen to those people that signed that petition and come to the party with this.

In the government’s own *Marine and Coastal Policy* it says it in relation to coastal hazard risks that it should look at all options and aim:

... to ensure the most effective management tools are being used at the most effective time.

Well, Labor is failing to understand the importance of this issue, and the government must come and have a proper consultation and include proper experts. It says the best experts have been used, the best available science. Well, I challenge that, and the 2500 people that have signed this petition also challenge it. We need to understand that this is the canary in the coalmine in terms of erosion. This government must listen. It must come to the table, and it must do better than retreat.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (17:59): I would like to start by acknowledging all those who have signed this petition. This process is an important part of ensuring these Victorians’ voices can be and are heard. Thank you to the surf club volunteers for making the beach safer and for the tireless work that they do through Nippers, patrols, fundraising and events. It is an incredibly important part of our coastal community. I want to acknowledge and thank you for all that you do. I would also like to thank the representatives working with the community of Inverloch to address the challenges arising from coastal erosion; Ms Bath, the sponsor of this petition; and the member for Bass Jordan Crugnale,

who is here at the moment, who has been very active with the local community to discuss options from here. Jordan has spoken passionately and at length with me on this issue.

We know that Victorians love heading to the local beach, and around 80 per cent of Victorians visit a beach across our state at least once a year. They are incredibly important not just for recreation but also for tourism, and they help us keep cool and healthy during the hot summer months. Keeping our beaches accessible is critical for visitors, emergency services and local businesses. Investing in and growing our 57 surf lifesaving clubs and our 43,000 volunteers is an important part of this. Many of these surf clubs are like Inverloch, built in the sand dunes overlooking our stunning coastline.

To the Inverloch Surf Life Saving Club: you absolutely have the attention of the government and of the Legislative Council. The recent storms, which have been increasing in frequency, have caused significant damage to the dune structure in front of the surf lifesaving club. The damage that we saw in that storm event is not isolated to Inverloch. Eastern Victoria Region, which Ms Bath and I represent, has close to 50 per cent of Victoria's coastline. Whether it is Seaspray, Mornington, the southern peninsula or indeed Inverloch, coastal erosion is an emerging issue.

This section of coast is stunning. It has got thousands of years of cultural heritage and a very significant collection of dinosaur fossils, which has become a great tourism asset. Following the recent storms in September, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) has been working with council and other agencies on immediate safety works to restabilise the area around the surf lifesaving club. Further renourishment works are planned for the surf beach foreshore in 2025, with dune reconstruction designs currently in the tender process.

The Victorian government is supporting coastal communities to adapt to erosion, flooding and sea level rise. Since 2018 the Labor government has invested more than \$1.7 million in installing coastal protection structures on Inverloch surf beach to protect public infrastructure and assets. This includes the geotextile seawall, which was a \$450,000 investment by DEECA; Cape Paterson-Inverloch Road rock revetment emergency works and engineered revetment, which cost \$950,000; and \$25,000 of work at Wreck Creek.

DEECA and other agencies are continuing to actively monitor erosion on Inverloch's coast. Land managers, including Parks Victoria, have been supporting short-term mitigation and protection works while the long-term research and planning of the strategic project continues. On 7 October DEECA staff met with local community groups, including the lifesaving club alongside the regional and strategic partnership members and member for Bass Jordan Crugnale. The ongoing plan for Inverloch surf beach and the consequences of the recent storms were discussed throughout, and coastal engineers were available to provide the community with additional information. The geotextile seawall caused erosion at the end into the dune, called terminal scour, which is expected with the way wave energy behaves at the end of coastal protection structures during high-energy events. Bass Coast Shire Council undertook emergency works following the August–September storms to bring sand back to this area, rebuild the dune around the seawall and reinstate the beach. DEECA is preparing to engage a coastal engineer consultant to design the large-scale dune reconstruction and beach renourishment, which is funded through a \$3.3 million grant from the Commonwealth coastal and estuarine risk mitigation program. This large-scale engineered construction work, involving approximately 100,000 to 150,000 cubic metres of sand supporting revegetation, is intended to be undertaken in 2025.

I look forward to seeing this work beginning soon to help protect this much-loved part of Victoria for future generations, and I want to finish by again acknowledging all those who have signed this petition and the surf club volunteers for the tireless work they are doing.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:04): It is my honour to rise today to speak in support of the petition sponsored by my Nationals colleague Melina Bath to save the Inverloch Surf Life Saving Club. President, it would be great just to acknowledge Glenn Arnold, who is the president of the

Inverloch Surf Life Saving Club, and his daughter Maya, who are joining us in the gallery observing this discussion today.

There are not a whole lot of lifesaving clubs or beaches in northern Victoria, but I can acknowledge Mildura has a lifesaving club, and I certainly do appreciate going to the beach and enjoying, as Mr McIntosh referred to, the amazing beaches that we have here in Victoria. I remember meeting volunteers from the club at a public hearing in Traralgon as part of the climate resilience inquiry soon after their beach was eroded yet again, and the photos are dramatic. They show the impact that it had and this club that is just on the verge of falling in. The club facilities and the tower are not that old – they were built in 2010 – but that erosion has just ripped the beach away, leaving the area very vulnerable and the facility very vulnerable. The risks are very clear. The club talked at the inquiry about the number of beachgoers going further and further down the beach, away from where the resources are and where the flags are, and this is putting people at risk who are coming to use the beach facilities, because there are very fast flowing currents in the area.

The people that appeared on behalf of the club said that it is that sheer lack of activity that is causing frustration to the club. They said they do not know who to talk to, so it was good to hear Mr McIntosh today. Certainly we do want you advocating for action with the government, because the sand that has been put in there is very quickly moving away, and this is not a facility that can wait years because, as Glenn Arnold said:

We are literally metres from dropping a multimillion-dollar building into the ocean. That is crazy behaviour when we could be dropping rocks in front of it and protecting it right now.

He said that in front of us at the hearing, and it highlighted the need to take action.

We have got to consider the work of the volunteers that assist at the club. It is incredible what they do. Surf Life Saving Australia will tell you that they are the biggest youth movement in the country. They have 50 training programs for young people every year – first aid and rescue. In the region there are a lot of tourists that come to the club. They have 20,000-odd tourists at the front of their beach every year, and they have crowds coming to the beach. They patrol for over 5000 hours. This is a huge amount. There were 7000 preventative actions just last year. They have had a huge increase in the number of people, and we just want to acknowledge the incredible volunteer work that they do. It is no surprise that in just four days there were over 2500 signatures in support of this petition.

I think it is very frustrating for people right across regional Victoria, I should say, because Stephen Duncan, who is from the Inverloch Surf Life Saving Club, said this at the hearing:

The local communities throughout regional Australia are losing control of their community, and they are the ones that actually live in it. They are the ones that have to deal with it every day.

I am seeing this a lot in northern Victoria, the impact of major renewable energy projects. Under this government they have taken away the right of repeal. They are fast-tracking developments, and it is very concerning to the local communities.

I should also mention that on 30 July I presented a petition in relation to the JB Osborne Theatre. A response from the minister was due on 29 August, which was nine weeks ago, yet the community is yet to receive a response from the minister. Over 1000 people signed that petition calling on the government to assist with restoration works at the 400-seat theatre there, but it has fallen into disrepair. Again, we need the government to listen, because when people raise petitions they are raising concerns that matter to their local communities. I just want to commend the Kangaroo Flat community, who are really advocating for continued progress in this area. But petitions are important and very valuable, and it is very disappointing to see not just this lifesaving club but also the JB Osborne Theatre falling into disrepair under this current government.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:09): On 2 September wild storms ripped through our state, including in our Eastern Victoria Region. These storms accelerated erosion across multiple beaches, including Inverloch surf beach, which exposed the wreck of HMAS *Amazon* and caused it to float

60 metres along the beach. This ship beached at Inverloch in 1863 and is the number one item listed as being at risk on Heritage Victoria's maritime register. I was fortunate enough to visit the wreck and see the incredibly well preserved piece of hull, which is only so well preserved because it had been buried in wet sand for many, many years. The reason I start with this story is to paint a picture of how extensive the erosion is in Inverloch; it caused something which had been buried for so many decades to become so exposed. Unfortunately Heritage Victoria has stated there is nothing that can be done to preserve this piece of wreckage. But in contrast to the future of the 160-year-old *Amazon* wreckage, we can do something to save the Inverloch Surf Lifesaving Club, which is barely 25 years old but is facing the same issue.

The government have been asleep at the wheel when it comes to their own cape-to-cape resilience project, which includes the Inverloch surf beach. Consultations on these issues started in mid-2021, and even that was two years after the member for Bass said that the erosion in Inverloch was amongst the worst in the state. I am actually beginning to wonder what Labor does all day, because, I mean, this issue has been going on for more than five years, and the residents of Wonthaggi went through a tortuous six months at the start of the year with the environmental planning overlay before it was rectified. San Remo Primary School and Phillip Island hospital are still waiting for their promised funding from the last election, and the people of Lang Lang are still waiting for their bypass and are now in the gun due to the government's proposal of draft planning controls.

Now, back to the Inverloch surf beach and surf lifesaving club. Finally, the government have been dragged kicking and screaming to release their draft cape-to-cape plan, but the final report is not being released until mid next year, a full four years after the start of the project. The community consultation that has been undertaken over the last two years is extremely flawed. Only a small number of people were consulted. Despite Inverloch having a population of 6400 people, which triples to 20,000 people over the summer months with tourists, seasonal residents and holiday-makers, the government consultation involved two surveys, with 94 responders; two virtual community information sessions, with 50 people; six workshops for 50 people, one of which was an official launch – so a feel-good session – and four sessions with community members, while the other 20 in attendance were all from the department; and some pop-up event, which reached a few hundred people. All this flawed consultation continued with the release of a draft plan and a limited time to make a submission, which has only been extended this month thanks to the action of our colleague Ms Bath. The fact is that Labor has not engaged its residents properly or adequately reported the community's values.

For years this serious erosion of the Inverloch foreshore has caused considerable concern for local communities. In June 2022 the Liberal–Nationals coalition committed \$6 million to addressing the erosion of the Inverloch foreshore. The plan was to invest in studies at locations where erosion is seen as a critical problem. Over the past 10 years Inverloch has become one of the worst-hit beaches, with coastal erosion taking 70 metres around the surf club and Wreck Creek.

This government must come up with a better plan which includes saving the surf lifesaving club public and private infrastructure as well. The truth of the matter is if something is not done, the Inverloch Surf Lifesaving Club, other than a few sandbags at the front – not the sides, because that is too much – which stop the water coming in the front but allow erosion around the sides, will face some serious issues that will soon become issues for home owners and that street along Inverloch – (*Time expired*)

Motion agreed to.

Adjournment

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (18:14): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Renewable energy infrastructure

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:14): (1227) My adjournment is to the Minister for Energy and Resources. As a member for Northern Victoria I represent a region that covers over 100,000 square kilometres, the top half of the state. There is a saying that God gave us two ears and one mouth so that we should listen twice as much as we speak. I encourage the minister to listen to the people who live and work in rural and regional areas, who deserve a seat at the table in decisions that affect their local communities. For too long the government and multinational corporations pushing renewables projects have had little regard for communities that are directly impacted. I have spoken with a fifth-generation Mallee farmer who is in the path of VNI West and has also been approached by 13 different companies, including wind and solar, who are keen to utilise his land, with a relentless barrage of phone calls, doorknocks and contracts with lots of fine print.

I met Claire Tuohey in Colbinabbin about the proposed Cooba solar farm, with plans to construct 740,000 solar panels and 300 batteries on prime agricultural land. It is opposed by the Colbinabbin Renewable Action Group, which represents 60 businesses, farmers and residents who surround the property. Nanneella wind farm is another project with plans for 25 wind turbines with a tower height of 265 metres and blades spanning 170 metres. The distance of only 1 kilometre between the turbines and neighbouring homes falls well short of best practice. In the King Valley, John and Jess Conroy have been joined by locals to protest the proposed Meadow Creek solar factory, which would see 475,000 panels constructed on prime agricultural land. Residents are angry at the government's reckless rollout of large-scale renewable projects on prime agricultural land and too close to homes while removing the right of residents to appeal. In the rollout of renewables, straightforward questions remain unanswered. While renewable companies can be fast-tracked and approved, it seems no-one can provide an answer on liability insurance.

The Nationals and Liberals have announced a regional energy development policy that puts communities first. This policy returns the power to those who live and work in these areas, giving a voice to those affected most by renewable projects and bringing down the cost of living with fair compensation for impacted landowners and cheaper electricity bills. We will revoke planning scheme amendments that strip local communities of their say, and we will introduce protective measures to ensure major projects are assessed rigorously and independently. We have committed to bringing back a 2-kilometre buffer zone around proposed wind towers to safeguard residential properties and ensure that new energy projects face a comprehensive and transparent planning process. In considering the planning permits for these renewable energy projects I ask the minister to listen to local concerns and ensure that local communities have a seat at the decision-making table on projects that affect them. Renewables are beneficial when they are in the right place, but we want regional areas to benefit from well-placed renewable energy developments that take land use and different farming methods into account and benefit local communities.

Small business support

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:17): (1228) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Small Business. I am blessed to have my electorate office next door to the beautiful beaches of Chelsea, surrounded by many fantastic local businesses. But often when you walk down these high streets you are struck by the number of shops with reduced hours or just not even opening at all. This is the reality for many small businesses in my region, who are dealing with a barrage of increased costs. At a time like this small businesses need as much support as we can give them so that they can not only survive but thrive. Partners in Wellbeing is a specialist small-business program that offers this kind of support. The program has helped over 5000 small businesses through free, confidential, one-on-one financial, business and wellbeing support. Originally started as a pandemic initiative, this program became an invaluable source of support for the small business community, particularly as the cost of living began to bite and the number of insolvencies in Victoria jumped 29 per cent in 2023.

It is at a time like this that the wraparound services offered by Partners in Wellbeing are so essential to ensuring that the over 600,000 small businesses in Victoria have access to support when and where it is needed, yet the Victorian government has severely reduced funding for this service and significantly reduced the number of businesses that are able to access it. As a result it is expected that without government intervention Partners in Wellbeing will have to cease operating altogether in the coming months. After this government reduced funding there was an 81 per cent increase in calls to the Small Business Debt Helpline. The closure of this program would have an even greater impact. There is a clear demand for services that is simply not over yet. So I ask: will the minister advocate for funding for Partners in Wellbeing and its restoration as a statewide program so all Victorian businesses can access this important service?

Electronic land transfers

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (18:19): (1229) My adjournment matter is directed towards the Minister for Planning, and the action I seek once again is for the minister to direct her department to progress the investigation into the practicality of allowing e-conveyancing as part of the home-purchasing process. Minister, Victoria is in the middle of a housing affordability crisis under the watch of your government. Despite the window-dressing and media opportunities that we were all subjected to last week, we know that things are not going to get better under Labor, and that is because the government is not interested in fixing the housing crisis, only their own disastrous bottom line.

One small but very practical measure the minister could actually achieve for those seeking to enter the housing market would be around competition reform in the e-conveyancing market, which has been paused since June. I understand the minister has previously expressed some support for doing so, and I understand that the Australian Registrars' National Electronic Conveyancing Council will be considering the outcomes of a Queensland and New South Wales review imminently. This is a positive step, as the industry needs urgent commitment that the program will be restarted as soon as possible. Introducing competition reform and cutting red tape is a simple and effective way in which government can offer practical support for new home buyers that involves delivering them less cost in a home purchase, which is a good idea, and that is what competition would bring. I am a big advocate for doing so. Any small step to create competition and cut red tape and regulation is a good one.

Good things can be done with ministerial will. Given the minister has previously expressed support for this reform, I repeat my call for the minister to direct her department to work with industry. It is interesting to see New South Wales and Queensland initiate a review, but the Minister of Planning has now gone silent. I ask the minister to perhaps cease listening to her corporate mates in industry super and start listening to new home buyers, who would prefer to have competition in their e-conveyancing so they can get a better outcome. Less cost for homebuyers is obviously a good thing. The minister has now accepted that that is a good thing by reinstating the stamp duty concession that her own government removed. Stop listening to your big corporate industry super mates, who are protecting a monopoly, and start listening to homebuyers, who want a cheaper outcome on their purchase.

School cleaning

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:22): (1230) My adjournment tonight is for the Minister for Education, and the action that I seek is for the Labor government to hire school cleaners through the Department of Education and offer them secure, well-paid, ongoing positions. Their current practice of outsourcing cleaning services in our public schools is undervaluing the role of our cleaners within their school communities and is leading to job insecurity, inadequate pay and poor working conditions for school cleaners. These cleaners provide our schools with a vital service and a safe environment for students. They clean up after kids. That is no mean feat. We should be offering them secure jobs within the department with reasonable workloads in decent conditions. During the recent inquiry into the state education system in Victoria we heard about the shortcomings of

outsourcing school-cleaning roles to private cleaning companies. The United Workers Union explained that:

Contract companies are run for profit, not for service. Cleaners are required to do more with less, and this places immense and unacceptable pressure on our cleaners and results in sub-quality services.

We heard from Julie Hooper, a school cleaner. She explained:

I am a cleaner. I have been a cleaner for over 20 years cleaning schools. I love cleaning schools, because you watch the kids grow up. It is at the stage where I am embarrassed to say I am a school cleaner because the standard has gone down that much. We are losing hours. In school holidays we are told we have to take holidays, with or without pay. If you have got no holiday pay, you are not going to get paid. Then we go back, and we have got a week to get the school back up to scratch. It is not happening.

Outsourcing is clearly failing our school communities. Cleaners are integral to the daily operations of our schools, and they deserve to be treated as valued members of the team. Direct employment would not only improve their working conditions but also enhance the quality and consistency of cleaning services provided. For example, in Queensland, Western Australia, the ACT and Tasmania school cleaners are directly employed by their state and territory governments. Anything less than bringing these essential workers into direct employment with the Department of Education would be a failure to address the issues at hand. Minister, the responsibility for this change lies with you. I urge you to take immediate action to end the outsourcing of school-cleaning services and to ensure that cleaners are provided with good, secure jobs through the department.

Energy policy

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:25): (1231) My adjournment matter is for Minister for Energy and Resources, and the action I seek is for the minister to urgently explore opportunities for renewable biogases to be used to supplement and boost gas supply in Victoria. I recently had the pleasure of welcoming attendees to the Shepparton bioenergy forum, which brought together industry groups, academics and government and business leaders to discuss future opportunities for renewable biogas in Victoria. We heard about the unique opportunity Shepparton has to develop a virtuous circular economy where organic waste from our significant agriculture and food processing sectors could be used to generate renewable biogas that could in turn power our manufacturing and production.

Gas has an important role to play in Victoria's future energy mix, and carbon neutral alternatives to natural gas like biomethane and hydrogen will be important for maintaining energy security while decarbonising our economy. Victorian industrial manufacturers and food processors are significant users of energy and gas, and our state's gas distribution network supplies more gas than any other state. Victoria has almost 900 industrial gas users, who are only 0.04 per cent of customers but account for 31 per cent of gas consumption. Energy reliability and quality are critical to their business performance because power failures cause very expensive plant shutdowns, wasted product and lost production. Many manufacturers depend on gas and simply cannot switch their operations to all-electric. Gas is required for the intense bursts of heat required in sterilisation procedures in dairy processing or in high-temperature galvanising, for example. These industries are particularly worried about the gas shortages and gas rationing that are predicted as a result of the Allan Labor government's failing energy policies.

It is therefore vital that we develop alternative sources of gas. Biomethane is interchangeable with natural gas and fully compatible with existing pipe infrastructure, home gas appliances and industrial manufacturing processes. It can be pumped straight into the gas network to supplement natural gas supply and mitigate predicted gas shortages. But the Allan Labor government is dragging its feet on key regulatory reforms and sitting on a crucial directions paper. Submissions for Victoria's renewable gas consultation paper closed over a year ago, in 2023, but since then nothing has been heard from the government about it. Unlike New South Wales, Victoria does not yet allow biogas to be pumped into the existing gas network. Consider the example of Melbourne Water, which produces 1.8 million

gigajoules of biogas energy a year – 70 per cent of that is used to produce its own electricity for treating wastewater, but 30 per cent is left over and has to be flared because they are not yet allowed to deliver it into the gas network. I call on the minister to urgently explore Victoria's biogas opportunities so that our organic waste can power a clean future.

Energy policy

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (18:28): (1232) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Energy and Resources, and the action I seek is for the minister to halt the renewables push and extend the life of Victoria's coal-fired power stations to protect our prime agricultural land from the destruction of renewable energy facilities and transmission lines.

Yesterday it was revealed that Victorian farmers are under threat from the invasive renewable energy push. The 240-kilometre Victorian stretch of Transmission Company Victoria's VNI West powerline will traverse about 250 farms and other private properties. That is 250 Victorian families who will lose productive farmland. That is not to mention the countless others who will be affected by the building of wind and solar energy facilities. I note that yet again none of these facilities are anywhere near the city, which will benefit from the destruction of our beautiful regional areas. By the time these so-called renewable energy facilities are decommissioned and the land restored, the knowledge our farmers have right now will be gone. Those farming families will have moved on, and there will be no-one left to feed and clothe this country.

Currently Victoria's three remaining coal-fired power stations provide 70 per cent of Victoria's electricity requirements. This government seems determined to send Victoria back to the dark ages by shutting them down before having a viable baseload source of power. The technology is just not there. We have already been warned of rolling blackouts and/or brownouts during the summer by AEMO. The government blames ageing coal infrastructure. I blame the failure to maintain and upgrade the infrastructure by this government and many governments who have gone before. Alternatives to destroying our agricultural industries must be explored before it is too late. Other countries in the world seem to be finding other ways to power their cities and towns. Nuclear, gas, hydro – these are all viable options to power our state and lower our emissions, but for some unknown reason this government seems determined to power ahead with unreliable renewables. The action I seek is for the minister to halt the renewables push and extend the life of Victoria's coal-fired power stations to protect our prime agricultural land from destruction via renewable energy facilities and transmission lines.

Suburban Rail Loop

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:30): (1233) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. The Suburban Rail Loop is an unfunded project at absolute best. The government know this and increasingly the public across the state know and understand this as well. The government is scrambling to find every dollar it can by tax or levy or charge to fund this project. One of these levies is the value capture tax which, to quote the minister in a response to Parliament:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

Those who benefit most from the SRL help contribute to its cost.

This has always been understood to mean that there will be a specific SRL tax for SRL precinct developers. The announcement by the government that it will relax planning laws around 50 new activity centres obviously explodes this model. Why would a business or a developer want to invest in a precinct where there is a specific additional value capture tax rather than in an area where there is not an SRL but there is an SRL-scale uplift? Why build a 20-storey tower in Box Hill South with this tax when you could do the exact same thing at greater profit in an area where there is no such tax, such as Blackburn, or Footscray for that matter?

When it says that those who will benefit from the Suburban Rail Loop will also bear the burden of paying for this costly, costly train line, does that extend to the entire state or only to people in the precincts of the SRL? The action I seek from the minister is for him to clarify whether any value capture model underpinning the Suburban Rail Loop's fundamental business model is viable given that you now can clearly develop towers outside the precinct zones without a Suburban Rail Loop value capture tax.

Active transport

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (18:32): (1234) My adjournment is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and the action I seek is to increase funding for active transport to the equivalent of 10 per cent of road-related expenditure in Victoria. Active transport, which includes walking, cycling and the use of mobility devices such as e-bikes and e-scooters, offers a clean, healthy alternative to driving that reduces traffic congestion, especially when used for short trips or in conjunction with public transport. This week the Australia Institute released a report which called for a major rethink of Australia's transport policy to boost active transport. The report, titled *Proactive Investment: Policies to Increase Rates of Active Transportation*, looked globally for policies that encouraged active transport, bringing all the knock-on benefits, including less congestion, reduced pollution, lower greenhouse gas emissions and improved physical and mental health.

Surveys of cycling rates show the percentage of people who use a bike either weekly, monthly or annually has dropped since 2011, outside a big increase during the pandemic when there were fewer cars on the road so people felt safer to get on two wheels. Frankly, we know that our roads are full now. What are they going to look like in decades to come? We need to look carefully at solutions in other places that have successfully dealt with the congestion and pollution problems that come with millions of people. Other countries offer more than EV subsidies. Some offer cash payouts for people who cycle to work, some offer rebates for people who ditch their cars for public transport. They build comprehensive cycle networks and they drop speed limits in local neighbourhoods.

The report outlines polling the institute conducted on these issues broken down by state. It is no surprise to me that 70 per cent of Victorians support building more walking and cycling paths in their areas, 62 per cent of us support schemes that would allow for petrol cars to be traded in for EVs, e-bikes or public transport tickets, 60 per cent support introducing a government e-bike subsidy scheme and most of us want transport and road legislation that includes requirements for infrastructure that supports more walking and cycling. Alison McCormack, the CEO of Bicycle Network, says policies are moving in the right direction 'but it is just going at a frustratingly slow pace compared to what we see on the international stage'. It is time to crack on and invest in what is required for active transport.

Housing affordability

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (18:35): (1235) My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Premier. I listened to the Premier and I read her press releases last week about housing. She wants to be the Premier that gets millennials into housing. What that actually translates to is that she knows she has a large cohort of voters that she has let down and now needs to scramble to find some way to appeal to them. I am a millennial. There are other millennials in here as well. I am calling out the Premier's words because that is all they are: hollow, cheap spin. She has had 10 years as a senior minister in this government, and now as Premier, to do something about housing affordability. Stamp duty has increased over that time. Land tax has increased over that time. Housing affordability has continued to decline because the Premier and her team does not have the foresight, let alone the competence, to plan ahead for new housing in this state.

Then there are those that are forced onto the rental market and have little to no hope of getting out of it – perennial renters who have all but lost hope of achieving that dream of owning their own home. Even renting has become more difficult thanks to excessive regulation, taxation and landlords being treated like some awful property baron. But what would the Premier know about housing stress? She

owns multiple properties. Maybe the only stress she knows is about managing them all. She is certainly not in touch with millennials – you only have to look at her social media for that.

The action that I seek from the Premier is to consider these tips that I have got for her: (1) actually talk to millennials instead of assuming you know better; (2) reduce stamp duty; (3) reduce land tax; (4) abolish windfall gains tax and do not just do it for one year, not a one-year sugar hit – lock it in and have a long-term vision for tax reform and property tax reform in this state; (5) help developers bring more land online instead of getting in their way; and (6) reform cultural heritage processes because they are a roadblock to getting more houses online. Lastly, but most importantly, consider regional Victoria to take the majority of the growth instead of always focusing on Melbourne. This Premier is supposed to be from regional Victoria. Well, it is about time she starts acting like it.

Electricity infrastructure

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:38): (1236) My matter for the adjournment tonight is for the attention of the Minister for Energy and Resources. Many in the chamber will have seen the article, initially in the *Weekly Times* but then further in the *Herald Sun* today, from Peter Hunt, who did get a scoop. He has got some maps which lay out the VNI West route. That route has not been clear. We have known individual sections of it, pieced together in a piecemeal way, dare I say, by the information you have from individual landholders. He has got some maps which show Transmission Company Victoria, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Australian Energy Market Operator, its routes and some alternate routes moving across the river, Murrabit, Kerang, around to the west of Boort and Charlston, down through Marnoo West, then to the east of Stawell and finally a connection through into the renewables link.

What this shows is 250 farms that will be impacted by the 500-kilovolt VNI West route. It is a very wide easement that is involved here. It is an easement that generates a significant amount of money for the government – up to \$177 million, \$177,000 per kilometre – very significant revenue for the government through land tax. Importantly, the amounts are much less than what is being paid to landholders. Peter Hunt makes a lot of these points very clear. Tomorrow we understand the formal release of the VNI West material and route will occur. What is important here is that there has not been proper consultation, and I saw the comments made by a number of my colleagues earlier today about the government's approach to consultation – cutting communities and cutting councils out of that role. We certainly have announced a policy that would see things like VC261 removed and a proper buffer around certain low-emission technology generators. This is of course going to get much worse when we see the so-called renewable energy zones, with their spider-like connections to the main lines, come into operation.

What I am seeking today is for the minister to recognise the lack of consultation and to come and meet people along the route at some formal public meetings, or indeed, if she wanted, Mrs McArthur and I would be very prepared to take her to some people to meet them and hear their views. This is a request for a proper consultation before the government promulgates this. She needs to listen, she needs to learn and she will not do it – (*Time expired*)

National parks

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:41): (1237) My adjournment matter for the Minister for Environment concerns cuts to budget, staffing and services at Parks Victoria. Even when the government had money, Parks Victoria was not a priority. Now funds are scarce, Victoria's parks, like everything else beyond the tram tracks, are a low priority in their desperate efforts to shore up the ship. I have been pointing out the shortcomings of Parks Victoria for many years here, but while I still argue that they bring many problems on themselves, I do have some sympathy for the poor characters. I mean, how on earth could they realistically manage 4.12 million hectares of parks with 526 staff in the field?

Despite ministers introducing rules to penalise farmers for failing to control weeds and pests, everyone in the country knows the worst neighbour you can have is the government. State budget performance statistics show the area treated to minimise the impact of pest plants, pest animals and overabundant native animals has declined by 33 per cent in just three years, and things have got a whole lot worse in recent weeks. The *Weekly Times* reports Parks' confidential operations service catalogue has cut its 'must do' services from 111 to 60. The remainder now rate as 'could do if resources permit' or 'only do if tied funded' or 'stop/pause'. Removing dumped rubbish and managing invasive species like pigs, deer, rabbits and plants are no longer essential. Staff are being cut, and the paper claims that the junior rangers program, nature walks, the bush kinder and all other educational programs have been stopped. The Community and Public Sector Union says its Parks Victoria members are concerned that the organisation is unable to operate at the levels required to deliver. It is no wonder Parks have created a template workbook called 'Asset closures and prioritisation' so staff can create cookie-cutter responses to all the public complaints.

So it is truly staggering that Labor chooses now to introduce legislation to create a further 450,000 hectares of national parks in Victoria. This collision of budget reality with the policy promise of more national parks shows that Labor really has lost the plot. The action I seek from the minister is to halt any further expansion of Victorian national parks. If you cannot manage the existing land, do not create new parks. The risk is that with larger areas covered and falling resources, the government will not reverse the national parks designation or leave areas alone and open to public use. It would be simpler, cheaper and now, sadly, legal simply to invest in padlocks.

Antonio Park Primary School

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:44): (1238) The matter I have for the adjournment debate is actually a matter for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. I speak tonight about a school that is close to my heart, and that is Antonio Park Primary School. Those of you in this place who are familiar with that school might recall that I have spoken on a number of occasions about the need for a reduced traffic limit outside the front of the school and to the eastern boundary a reduced traffic signal as well. Some time ago I wrote to the minister, and the minister has responded and undertaken, as was committed to, a review. That review considered a number of speed reductions along Whitehorse Road and also along Deep Creek Road, and specifically it looked at four key aspects. One was to reduce the speed limit from 80 kilometres – that is right, 80 kilometres – to 60 kilometres along Whitehorse Road between Cook Road and Dampier Grove. The second thing was to reduce the speed limit from 80 k's to 70 k's along Whitehorse Road west of Cook Road to match the existing speed limit between Convent Lane and Thomas Street. The third was to reduce the 60-k school-time zone to 40. I will repeat that: to reduce the 60-k school-time zone to 40 – entirely appropriate, I would think. That is along Whitehorse Road in front of Antonio Park Primary School. The last and fourth thing was to induce a 40-k zone during school time along Deep Creek Road between Whitehorse Road and Edgerton Road. The minister wrote to me at the conclusion of this review and advised in the correspondence I have received that the proposed speed reductions along both Whitehorse Road and Deep Creek Road had been endorsed by the Department of Transport and Planning and their metro speed zoning committee. The advice I now have is that these changes will be considered for implementation in future network planning.

That all sounds very complicated. It is exactly and precisely what the school needs; it is exactly and precisely what we wanted to see. Of course now the action I seek this evening is to understand when the changes will actually occur. I would encourage the minister to do them with great haste. I do not need to emphasise I think for anyone in this place the urgency of ensuring that our children, not only when they arrive at school but when they leave school, have appropriate speed zones around those schools that give every parent, every teacher, every principal, every possible surety that they are doing so in a safe manner. The 40-k zone across all eight lanes of Whitehorse Road is entirely appropriate, as is the 40 k introduction along Deep Creek Road. I cannot wait for its introduction; I will be out there with banners. I just want to know when that will happen.

Regional health

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:47): (1239) My adjournment is for the Minister for Health, and it follows the tragic news that three infants died at the Latrobe Regional Hospital in recent weeks. This is heart-wrenching and difficult to comprehend, and I cannot imagine what the families of these children are experiencing right now. When preventable deaths and adverse outcomes occur in our hospital there should be thorough and independent investigations, publicly released findings and improvement to the systems to prevent reoccurrence. This is what transparency, accountability and care for citizens looks like, but not so with this government.

For many years systemic failures at Latrobe Regional Hospital have been exposed through tragic and preventable deaths, multiple investigations, whistleblower complaints and media reports. The government's response, however, is one cover-up after another. Last year the health watchdog Safer Care Victoria investigated seven preventable deaths at the hospital, and we still have not seen the findings of that report. What we do know from documents obtained by the coalition under freedom of information is that when the Minister for Health was informed of these tragedies she failed to alert the community. What she did do was make a plan to defer any questions to the Secretary of the Department of Health if they came up in a parliamentary inquiry. How could the minister's priority be public relations not system improvements when seven preventable deaths occurred at one hospital?

If this government put into health half the funding and focus it gives to construction projects, Victoria would have a health system that would be the envy of the world. For example, consider the \$675 million the government promised to build 10 hospitals by 2024. We are now in 2024 and the government is well and truly failing to meet those goals, yet the government can find tens of billions of dollars for construction projects like the \$216 billion SRL. Imagine how many world-class hospitals would be built, how many specialists, how many doctors, how many nurses and expert medical staff could be trained and employed with those funds. Imagine the difference this could make for everybody waiting for elective surgery. For 10 years this government has pursued the political and neglected the essential. It has filled the pockets of union bosses through overpriced construction projects and it has robbed Victorians of basic health care and services that are expected in a world-class jurisdiction. Minister, the action I seek is to commit to restoring public trust in the health system by allowing an independent review into regional hospitals that will properly identify and address the source of these fundamental – *(Time expired)*

Child protection

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:50): (1240) My adjournment question is to the Minister for Children, and while I ask the minister what immediate action is being taken to address the appalling and tragic situation in this state of unacceptable deaths of children in care, particularly protective care, the action I seek is for the minister to personally visit with me the workers and carers who knew the children and the young people and to meet with key stakeholders, families, family workers and carers et cetera to understand the issue better to develop better system improvements for the protection of Victorian children.

We have seen the deaths of six children over a three-month period in the troubled child protection system, with most of those children under two years old. Think about that: children under two years old are dying as a result. The blood is really falling on the hands of this government when it is not actually putting enough protective systems in place. According to the data from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, this is what we have: six children over a three-month period. Maybe there is more data out there, but this is what we know, and this is a shocking dereliction of duty, a duty of care that this government has. Twenty children known to child protection agencies have died in the 12 months up to September, according to the quarterly data released by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. It was reported yesterday that there have been 66 deaths since 2020. Think about the jump in deaths that we have here. There were nine deaths in 2022 to 2023. That in itself is unacceptable, but that jumped up to 17 deaths in 2023 to 2024. We are seeing a constant increase in

the number of people who are in protective care under this government, of children dying in care. It is simply not good enough. It is not okay.

It is not okay for one child to be in that situation, but to have so many children, so many young people, dying under the protection of this government is simply not good enough. The wellbeing and safety of our most vulnerable children should be paramount and above any question of finance. I noticed today that the minister was talking about money here and money there and money somewhere else, but if it is not actually doing the job, if there is not an understanding of what needs to be done, then the minister needs to go down there herself and roll up her sleeves and meet with these people and actually figure out a way to fix this situation, because the system, Minister, has failed these children. It has failed these families.

Illicit tobacco

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (18:53): (1241) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation regarding the ongoing violence and the surge in arson attacks linked with the illicit tobacco trade. My constituents in the west are among the victims of these attacks. Despite the continued violence and a rise in arson attacks associated with the illicit tobacco trade, Victoria remains the only state in Australia without such a scheme. The action I seek is for the Allan Labor government to implement a tobacco licensing scheme in Victoria. For over 18 months Victoria has experienced a troubling rise in tobacco-related crime. More than 100 firebombings have occurred at tobacco shops, raising serious safety concerns for both shop owners and the community. As noted by the chair of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, we need to act. We must act fast. Yet instead of taking timely action, the government has delayed necessary regulations, allowing organised crime syndicates to thrive. The committee also highlighted that there are currently 463 shops selling illicit tobacco, include 25 in Laverton alone. This alarming statistic illustrates both the scale of the problem and the ineffective response from the Allan Labor government. While smoking rates have declined from 22.1 per cent in 2001 to 9.2 per cent today, illicit cigarette consumption remains high, as shown in wastewater testing.

A police taskforce alone cannot eliminate the illegal tobacco trade and organised crime syndicate connection. The Victorian police force already lacks the resources to send police officers to serve their local areas. To effectively combat the illegal tobacco trade a combined approach is necessary. A police taskforce in collaboration with a strong tobacco licensing framework is essential for restoring order and protecting the community. This measure is crucial not only to curb the illegal tobacco trade but also to safeguard public safety and address the serious crime wave associated with this issue.

With 28 years experience in policing, I can tell you now that a taskforce alone will not solve the problem, so when will the Allan government put the community first and commit to introducing legislation for a tobacco licensing scheme? Immediate and decisive action is required now to prevent further violence and protect the citizens of Victoria.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Luu, I might give you a chance to change the action you are seeking.

Trung LUU: The action I seek is to implement a tobacco licensing scheme in Victoria.

The PRESIDENT: Beautiful, that will do. You were calling for legislation – I was concerned about that.

Responses

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (18:57): There were 15 matters today: Mrs Broad to the Minister for Energy and Resources, Ms Payne to the Minister for Small Business, Mr Mulholland to the Minister for Planning, Mr Puglielli to the Minister for Education, Ms Lovell to the Minister for Energy and Resources, Mrs Tyrrell to the Minister for Energy and Resources, Mr Welch to the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Ms Copsey to the Minister for Public and Active Transport, Mr McCracken to

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the Premier, Mr Davis to the Minister for Energy and Resources, Mrs McArthur to the Minister for Environment, Mr McGowan to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Mrs Heath to the Minister for Health, Mrs Hermans to the Minister for Children and Mr Luu to the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation. I will make sure all of them are passed on to the relevant ministers for response in line with the standing orders.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 6:58 pm.