



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 15 May 2024

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Georgie Crozier

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Bach, Matthew ¹	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Luu, Trung	Western Metropolitan	Lib
Batchelor, Ryan	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Mansfield, Sarah	Western Victoria	Greens
Bath, Melina	Eastern Victoria	Nat	McArthur, Bev	Western Victoria	Lib
Berger, John	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	McCracken, Joe	Western Victoria	Lib
Blandthorn, Lizzie	Western Metropolitan	ALP	McGowan, Nick	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib
Bourman, Jeff	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	McIntosh, Tom	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Broad, Gaele	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira ²	Western Metropolitan	IndLib	Ratnam, Samantha ⁵	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem	Northern Metropolitan	DLP
Ettershank, David	Western Metropolitan	LCV	Stitt, Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Galea, Michael	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Symes, Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Gray-Barberio, Anasina ³	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Tarlamis, Lee	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Heath, Renee	Eastern Victoria	Lib	Terpstra, Sonja	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hermans, Ann-Marie	South-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Tierney, Gayle	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Shaun	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee	Northern Victoria	PHON
Limbrick, David ⁴	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard ⁶	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

¹ Resigned 7 December 2023

² Lib until 27 March 2023

³ Appointed 14 November 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 July 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 November 2024

⁶ Appointed 7 February 2024

Party abbreviations

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

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

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

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

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Wednesday 15 May 2024

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

The PRESIDENT: Could I please ask the members of the Greens to remove the scarves that they are wearing today and if they could put them in spots that are not visible to the chamber.

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

Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978 – Order of 26 April 2024 giving approval to the granting of a lease at Murtoa Caravan Park Reserve.

*Business of the house***Notices**

Notices of motion given.

*Rulings from the Chair***Political material**

Samantha Ratnam: On a point of order, President, can I seek some clarity on your previous request for us to remove keffiyehs, which I understood. But I understood after that there was some conversation about other symbolism, including earrings that represent the watermelon, which is a symbol that people ascribe meaning to. I just note that there are a number of members in this chamber wearing various badges, and I do not know what they are about. What is the definition that you are seeking to make a ruling on regarding this?

The PRESIDENT (09:50): Thank you, Dr Ratnam, for that point of order. I suppose I put it to the chamber, and I did not have any adverse commentary back to me when I did, that if there are certain badges for which you think there is pretty much a consensus on the view of what that badge represents – as in Daffodil Day, Anzac Day or even the Neil Daniher event today – I think the chamber should be pretty relaxed about it. Back when there were greater presidents than me, who used to wear wigs, a long time ago, the wearing of badges was completely ruled out. I think we have got to a point where if it is a cause we can all get behind or we reasonably think everybody can get behind, we should be relaxed about it. If it is symbolism – and I am not making a commentary on the symbolism – that you could reasonably expect the whole chamber is not behind, then I think it is a fair ruling to say that that should not be worn. It is similar to a concern that was put to me at the time around people wearing ‘yes’ badges for the referendum, where there were clearly a number of members in this chamber who did not believe that voting yes was a consensus. I hope that is helpful.

*Business of the house***Adjournment**

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (09:52):
I move:

That the Council, at its rising, adjourn until Tuesday 28 May 2024.

Motion agreed to.

*Motions***Middle East conflict**

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (09:52): 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 this house 'stands with Israel', the following has occurred:
 - (a) in late October more than 1 million Palestinians in the north were advised to move south for their safety;
 - (b) in January, Israel Defense Forces troops advanced into Khan Yunis, a southern area where Gazans had been told to evacuate;
 - (c) there are consequently about 1.4 million Palestinians now sheltering in Rafah under continual and increasing bombardment;
- (2) recognises the statement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk that he cannot see how a full-scale invasion of Rafah can be reconciled with international humanitarian law;
- (3) does not support the state of Israel's continued invasion of Gaza; and
- (4) supports calls for an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

Leave refused.

*Members statements***Fitzroy Primary School**

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (09:54): On budget day last week I had the opportunity to visit Fitzroy Primary School to share some exciting news. This year's state budget will allocate an additional \$6.6 million to deliver the second stage of the school's master plan. Our government has recently delivered \$9 million worth of upgrades to this heritage building on the George Street site of Fitzroy Primary. This included a new library, meeting rooms, a staff room and new classrooms for art, food, and science and technology. It was fantastic to see the students using this facility. These investments are crucial to support this growing bilingual French–English school in Melbourne's inner north. I want to thank the acting school principal Nathan Moore for his leadership and dedication to the school community. I would also like to thank the school captain Isabella and vice-captains Abdulmalik and Rama for taking me on a tour around the school.

Fitzroy Legal Service

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (09:55): On another matter, I also had the pleasure of visiting the Fitzroy Legal Service to announce that this year's budget will renew funding for their Q+Law program. Community legal centres in Victoria help build a better understanding of laws in our state. Fitzroy Legal Service is a leader in the space, and their programs are often accessed by the most vulnerable people in our community. Q+Law provides a free statewide safe entry point to accessing legal assistance for all individuals who identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ communities. A huge thankyou to the interim CEO Hamish McLachlan, chief operating officer Shane Marr and legal director Rebecca Johnston-Ryan for the work they are doing. I wish Q+Law all the best with the amazing work that they do for our community in Melbourne's north.

Ancient Church of the East, St Mary's Church

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (09:55): Recently we celebrated Orthodox Easter, and I had the opportunity to visit Father Archdeacon Tematiuse Joseph Esha Sawa from St Mary's Ancient Church of the East in Coolaroo and join him and his family to wish them a happy

Orthodox Easter. I would like to thank him for inviting me into his home and pass on my thanks to him and his community for how warmly they have treated me on multiple occasions.

St Mary Coptic Orthodox College

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (09:56): I also had the opportunity recently to speak to the year 12 cohort at St Mary's Orthodox college in Coolaroo. It was great to speak to them about my journey to public life and maybe give them a bit of inspiration for the future in the northern suburbs. I would like to thank head of secondary Mr Evan Kasapis and principal Germaine Saad for the warm invitation.

Holy Spirit of the Syriac Catholic Church

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (09:56): It was also wonderful to recently visit the future site of Holy Spirit of the Syriac Catholic Church in Campbellfield. I would like to thank Monsignor Fadhel Alqass Ashaq for showing me around. I am so proud of the volunteers of this faith community and the amazing work they have done so far – all volunteers building a fantastic new church in the north, which will be such a gift and such a blessing for our community in the northern suburbs. I am looking forward to coming back for the opening, because there are no better friends to faith communities in the north than me and the Victorian Liberal Party.

Great forest national park

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:57): I rise to record the Libertarian Party's opposition to the proposal to limit outdoor recreation in an area of central Victoria that is larger than the ACT. I refer to the proposed great forest national park, but there is absolutely nothing great about a plan that locks people out of public land. Horseriders, four-wheel drivers, dog walkers, trail bike riders, mountain bikers, prospectors and recreational hunters would all be banned from doing what they have done for generations. Our national parks would then apply their famous lock-and-leave management policy, which inevitably leads to infestations of weeds and feral animals that are controlled only by bushfire. Perhaps this explains why Australia is a world leader in both the number of national parks and the extinction of mammals.

The proposed national park would lock Victorians into a future where kids who might otherwise be camping in their favourite spot will stay home and browse YouTube videos about camping while their parents read news stories about childhood obesity. The great forest national park is an anti-human proposal of the kind that is now a pattern in this state, like the ban on the timber industry and the lockout of rock climbers in the Grampians.

Libertarians believe in humanity. We believe public land should be for the public, and we condemn this environmental lockout they like to call the great forest national park.

Camberwell

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (09:58): My members statement is on the suburb of Camberwell. As you may know, I am committed to the hardworking, good people of Camberwell getting the best deal. The electorate of Hawthorn has a member of Parliament that is more focused on petty politics and fighting his own party than delivering. The people of Camberwell in the electorate of Hawthorn deserve a voice in this place. They had a voice in the hardworking former local member John Kennedy, and President, I plan on being that voice since being elected.

Last week I was incredibly pleased to visit Camberwell Primary School on budget day to give them some great news. They are getting \$9.7 million to fund the school, and that means a new toilet block and a brand new building. As Janet the principal said to me in her office, she wants the school to become a community hub – a meeting place for the community, from sport to volunteering and much more – and I share that dream. As chair of the Camberwell Junction community reference group, which is workshopping the future development of Camberwell Junction, we are going to make it happen.

Camberwell is a beautiful place, with good schools, beautiful streets and parks, great transport and local businesses, and I cannot wait for more families to come to enjoy Camberwell for generations to come.

National Volunteer Week

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:59): It is volunteers week next week, and let us all give a shout-out for the wonderful difference that everyone makes in our communities. From first responders to those that restore and clean up our environment, every single facet of our communities is made better by volunteers. My guests in Parliament today are Latrobe Valley royalty. Alf and Stella Vella have run the Gippsland Motorcyclists Toy Run for a quarter of a century, and today we are going to launch the 25th run. It is done in style. It leaves Nefertiti Court in Traralgon and is done on the back of many Harley-Davidson motorbikes. Over the years, every year 2000 children receive gifts that have been supported through individuals, sporting clubs and businesses right across Gippsland. I know Alf and Stella's mantra is 'We can't do everything well, but we can do one thing well.' They do this with the most graciousness, kindness and love for their fellow human beings and to see the children smile on Christmas Day. Toys are distributed through the Salvation Army. I congratulate them on their kindness and congratulate all of our volunteers who make such a difference to our communities next week for volunteers week.

IDAHOBIT

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:01): We are about to mark another International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia. Some people may not know why this is still needed. Some people may wonder why showing pride in our LGBTIQ+ communities is still so important. I am going to share with the chamber some of the comments that I have received while working as a member of Parliament – and full disclosure, these are full of typos, they are often barely intelligible, and they do get quite repetitive.

Did you just suck in a helium balloon? Just asking
 Lost me when I realised you were an effeminate homosexual community
 Yeah i agree with the eunuch
 Didn't mention the price of KY and cucumbers
 The hairline of this gaybo
 Last thing we need is your kind in parliament
 Of course he uses fairy detergent, it's made for his kind
 A bag of helium, free
 He or she wtf
 Cost of trans surgery, priceless
 Did this bloke eat a tide pod before he started talking
 What is this thing
 Have your balls not dropped yet
 Too much estrogen
 Right message wrong messenger
 She seems she knows what shes saying
 Is that your actual voice

Looks like I am running out the clock here.

WTF is this thing
 He needs testosterone
 Sounds like helium balloons were on special tho
 He forgot to show what he pays for his tampons

How much was the testosterone blockers?
How much for a bottle of helium
F im happy im not gay and have stupid earrings
Lay off the helium brother
Some helium consumed before speech?
Was the room filled with helium
Bro sounds like he swallowed an entire bottle of helium
When they said use your voice he / her chose the wrong one
This bloke needs some testosterone
The squeaky voice? Free
Missing all testosterone
How's the voice lol
Lost me after i heard the voice

I could go on.

Portland–Maroona rail line

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (10:03): I am very thrilled and excited to talk about today the Albanese Labor government's \$150 million commitment to the upgrade of the Maroona rail freight line in Western Victoria in my electorate. This has been a project that has been advocated for for the last 20 to 30 years, and I am just so thrilled. This is an absolute game changer for our region, and I am so proud that the Albanese Labor government, unlike predecessor governments for decades, have been able to come up with this project. This connects Portland to the national rail freight grid; it connects Portland to the international markets. It will create jobs. It will take us through the carbon neutrality journey. It will take trucks off the roads, it will save lives and it will mean much safer travel for communities in Western Victoria. I want to congratulate every single person over the last 20 or 30 years, including local government councillors that are long gone from their roles, who has sat at the Rail Freight Alliance table and given their time in advocating for this project. I also want to thank Senator Raff Ciccone and thank the advocacy of ministers Horne and Pearson in this government, all the other current councillors, including Greg Burgoyne, Matt Eryurek and Reid Mather, and all current members.

National Volunteer Week

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (10:05): This year the theme for National Volunteer Week is 'Something for everyone'. I have met so many amazing volunteers across Northern Victoria. To our showgrounds committees for keeping community spirit alive and having events that we can look forward to: thank you. To committees of management maintaining public halls in regional areas for their working bees and for taking the bins out each week: thank you. To our CFA and SES volunteers, who put in countless hours of training and give so much, we say thank you. To our Landcare volunteers for the important work they do to improve our waterways and restore native vegetation: thank you. To those in sport, thank you to all those who volunteer as coaches, scorekeepers and in so many other ways. There is always a team supporting the team playing.

I also want to congratulate the Friends of Bendigo East Pool committee of management and the working group. They were given notice that the pool would close for winter, but they came together. I especially want to thank the City of Greater Bendigo for working with these volunteers to find a sustainable solution to keep the pool open.

To our volunteers in churches, neighbourhood houses, Foodshare and op shops, providing support for people who need it: thank you. I also want to acknowledge the work done by Bendigo Winter Night Shelter volunteers, who have provided meals and shelter for the homeless over many years. Thank you for your service.

Volunteering provides an opportunity to share your expertise and develop new skills, be part of a team and find joy in helping others. To all our volunteers, who are the backbone of our community, I want to say thank you.

Motor neurone disease

The PRESIDENT: Mr McGowan, before you do your members statement, is this members statement relative to a beanie you are wearing now?

Nick McGowan: I can certainly make it.

The PRESIDENT: I was just going to say: I appreciate the cause, but the beanie is probably a stretch too far. If you are nimble enough that this members statement is going to be about the beanie you are wearing, I could probably live with that, and then you will take it off when you are finished.

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:07): I love lots about what we do, and I love nothing more than perhaps this morning when we all came together, those across the aisle and those across the benches, to support MND research.

Suicide prevention

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:07): I also love the fact that I get to meet very many constituents in the work that I do. Recently I came to meet Bree. Bree is the mother of three boys. Very sadly, Bree lost one of her sons due to youth suicide. Bree is not the first, and sadly Bree will not be the last. But Bree is having a fundraiser on 23 June, in Mitcham, and I would certainly like to encourage as many people as is humanly possibly to support Bree and her quest that no mother, no father, no anyone should have to go through the experience of losing a child to suicide.

That also leads me indirectly to Wayne Holdsworth. Wayne Holdsworth is not a constituent of mine, but I met with Wayne on Monday of this week. I came across Wayne because I read an opinion piece he wrote in the *Age*. He too talked about losing his son, Mac. He lost Mac when he was 17 years of age. One of the symptoms that Wayne was not familiar with, and neither was I, was the fact that Mac was euphoric on the night he took his life. That by all accounts is a sign that he had made the decision to take his life.

I would urge all Victorians to have a conversation with their children and to read Wayne Holdsworth's opinion piece online. We lost 801 Victorians to suicide last year. We cannot afford to lose any more.

Cannabis law reform

David ETTERSANK (Western Metropolitan) (10:09): I recently attended the annual MardiGrass festival at Nimbin with my colleague Rachel Payne. The three-day family-friendly event attracted thousands of visitors from across Australia, who gathered to celebrate the remarkable little plant that is enjoyed by millions of Australians and to call for meaningful drug law reform. There were no arrests or seizures, no incidents at all, just a very discrete police presence. In fact I was told that working on MardiGrass is a widely sought-after gig for the cops. Who can blame them? They had nothing to do but to stroll around and enjoy and mingle with very relaxed, happy people peacefully taking in the Zeitgeist. Certainly the cops I saw seemed to be digging the vibe as much as the attendees.

What a contrast to the 420 event we had in Melbourne a few weeks ago, with its overbearing police presence and multiple police interventions. I was asked so many questions at the festival – ‘What’s going on down there?’ ‘Don’t your cops have better things to do with their time than arrest peace-loving folk who like to smoke a bit of weed?’ ‘Isn’t Victoria supposed to be Australia’s most progressive state?’ ‘How can you have three-quarters of a million people consuming pot every year and 4.5 million people who want it decriminalised and yet have no action on cannabis reform? Doesn’t that make Victoria Australia’s most reactionary state?’ Now, possibly I was a bit stoned, but I could not answer those questions – *(Time expired)*

Holocaust Remembrance Day

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:10): 6 May marks Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, the day we pause to honour the memory of the 6 million Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust but also the Sinti and the Roma, the disabled, the homosexuals and the political opponents of the Nazis, principally Soviet POWs, who were subject to forced experiments and gassed to death. Now more than ever it is very important that we reaffirm our commitment to preventing this ever happening again.

I recently had the privilege of attending a commemoration of Yom HaShoah at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum in Elsternwick under the theme of 'Inheriting memories and preserving truth'. The event provided a poignant opportunity to reflect on human history's darkest chapter. Melbourne with its significant population of Holocaust survivors, including many within Southern Metro, stands as a testament to resilience.

Hate speech has no place in our community. We must continue to stand against antisemitism and all forms of racism and religious vilification. Our community thrives from difference, and we can and all should have political differences in our discourse. The war in Gaza is horrifying. Too many innocent civilians have died, but Melbourne's Jewish community should not be the targets of anger at the actions of the Israeli government, and the language of protest must not be antisemitic, because we all know how hate speech ends. I encourage everyone to clearly and vocally take a stand against antisemitism and other forms of racism and everyone to visit Melbourne Holocaust Museum.

Beaufort Probus Club

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (10:12): Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Beaufort Probus Club, where I was guest speaker on Monday this week. Particularly I would like to acknowledge president John Stokes along with the committee members, who do an amazing job. They certainly had a great meeting on Monday, and I was so proud to be there.

Raj and Preeti Khillan

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (10:12): Secondly, I would like to acknowledge Raj and Preeti Khillan. On Saturday evening this weekend just gone Raj and Preeti held a gala event where \$125,000 was raised to support organ donation in Australia. There were over 450 people at this event, and it was absolutely amazing to see so much good come out of it. I am so proud to be part of that event.

Upinder Singh

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (10:13): Thirdly, I would like to acknowledge Upinder Singh, who is a business owner in Melton. Upinder owns an Indian wholesale supermarket in High Street, and recently he has been the subject of a number of criminal activities from a number of young people in Melton – so much so that some of his staff have been impacted and female workers have to be rostered on with male workers just so they feel safe. I want to give a big shout-out to Upinder in Melton to make sure that he does stay the course and hang in there, because eventually the government might take crime seriously.

Violence against women

Georgie Purcell (Northern Victoria) (10:13): Let me tell you the term 'alpha' is not synonymous with 'male', and it never has been. Matriarchal societies where women rule include spotted hyenas, birds of prey and elephants. In seahorses and pipefish it is the male that gets pregnant and gives birth, and if that happened in humans, I think abortions would be free and on every street corner. The praying mantis, black widow spider and jumping spider are women who ate – quite literally. They serve and lick the plate by swallowing their male partners when they are done with them. With clownfish the largest, most aggressive female is the one with the highest authority. Ring-tailed lemur females are often more involved in the peacekeeping of the colony than the males, and in the lion kingdom lionesses are the first to eat, with the men simply getting mere scraps.

You have probably heard about penguins mating for life, and it is true that the male chooses the smoothest pebble he can find to give to a female as a gesture of longevity – and she will likely accept it. But females are also known to have up to three partners in one season. A female penguin would tell you that you can simply have it all.

Why am I sharing this with you all? Well, there has been a lot of talk about patriarchy lately as we continue to confront the epidemic of men’s violence in our country. It is most certainly a human construct that we need to fix, and I think we could learn a whole lot if we just paid more attention to the societies and constructs of our animal friends.

Blackburn station craft market

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:15): My members statement is in regard to the Blackburn station craft market, which I had the pleasure of attending on Saturday morning with my colleague Mr McGowan. Like many local markets, it is a market that is getting to a point of recovery from the lockdown era. It had to build itself back up from a very low ebb, and I would really like to commend the market for reintroducing back to the community the vibrancy, the variety and the opportunity to see different kinds of businesses. We had local crafts and home and garden providers. We had the local church St John’s providing free pancakes and face paints. We had a number of small microbusinesses setting up and having a valuable economic outlet for themselves. We had Skedaddle the traditional jazz band doing authentic jazz from the 1920s and 30s. I absolutely commend the Rotary Club of Forest Hill, who are all volunteers of course, setting up and running at their own effort this market for the community, and I strongly encourage all local members in my electorate to get down to South Parade in Blackburn on every second Saturday each month to enjoy the market.

Member for Pakenham

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:16): I would just like to take a brief moment to acknowledge that I had the privilege to listen to the member for Pakenham’s contribution in the other chamber this morning – the incredible, wonderful, brave Emma Vulin – and to hear her sharing her story about her MND diagnosis, and how wonderful it was to have Neale Daniher, MND Victoria and FightMND in the room too. We are blessed to have Ms Vulin here with us.

Eurovision Song Contest

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:17): On a lighter note, like other members in this place I am very privileged to be involved with many parliamentary friendship groups, so I was very excited to see many of the countries whose groups I am involved with perform so well at Eurovision over the weekend. Congratulations in particular to Ladaniva from Armenia, who came eighth, Slimane from France, who came fourth, and most impressively of all, Suspilne from Ukraine, who came third. Often shambolic but always entertaining, Eurovision is a celebration of multiculturalism and humanity coming together, so it is no wonder so many Australians, me included, tune in every year – and why wouldn’t you when our queen Petra Mede is hosting. Congratulations to all the contestants.

Production of documents

Infrastructure contributions

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:18): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that it was reported in the *Age* on 30 April 2024 that when asked if infrastructure contributions would be widened to include all of Melbourne, the Minister for Planning, the Honourable Sonya Kilkeny MP, said the government was reviewing a related report from a ministerial advisory committee appointed in 2020 and that the final report was never publicly released;

- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within three weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution:
- (a) the final report referred to in paragraph (1); and
 - (b) submissions from departments, industry or the community made to and/or accepted by the government, informing the ministerial advisory committee, as referred to in paragraph (1).

The state government has to explain why this in the public interest. The chamber no doubt absolutely has the power to call for documents, as we have discussed repeatedly. But noting that the government is intending to impose a levy on all property with respect to development, this will impose in effect a significant taxation burden and increase the price or the cost of housing. It is a direct impact on housing affordability. It is important I think to see that ministerial advisory committee report which the government has commissioned but has not shared with the Victorian community. It is clearly in the public interest that that document is sighted and we can see the basis on which the examination was done and the basis on which this taxation measure that the government has put in place was advanced. It is also important I think to see what input the government had, which is why point (2)(b) is part of the motion – to see what submissions from industry, departments and the community were made and informed the advisory committee.

As I said, this is a straightforward motion in its essence. I note that it is a very confined motion – it is for a single document and the documents that were used to inform the ministerial advisory committee – so it should not be difficult for the government to provide these documents in a timely manner, and that is especially important given the fact that the chamber will no doubt consider these matters of taxation across the whole state at a near point.

I also note that the government's tendency with the growth areas infrastructure contribution – and this measure tends to replicate GAIC – has been to sit on that GAIC money, so I am particularly interested to see what the report says about (1) ensuring that the money collected through this levy is actually spent in the municipality where it is collected and (2) how it is disbursed and what timeliness is involved.

One of the issues that I hope the committee has considered is that with GAIC the government has collected the money – often hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars – and retained that money at Treasury for many years. So people are living in estates that are bereft, in some cases, of proper infrastructure, yet through the purchase of the property they have paid those levies that have been put on the developers and the levies have gone to Treasury, where they have sat in some cases for many, many years. If we are going to have a system that collects development levies of this type, I hope that the committee has looked at the importance of collecting them and dispersing them swiftly so that the infrastructure is there and also that it is tied to the need for local infrastructure in the area from which they are collected.

It is a simple motion. We think it would be good for the chamber to support it, and it would also be very helpful for the government to act swiftly to bring those documents to the chamber.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:22): I rise to speak on Mr Davis's documents motion with respect to the report of the ministerial advisory committee – principally seeking to understand the nature of infrastructure contributions across Melbourne. I state at the outset the government is not going to be opposing the motion. As we have discussed extensively in the chamber recently, there is an appreciation, an understanding and an acceptance that the chamber has these powers to request the production of documents. The government, in consideration of those requests, goes through the normal processes that this government and previous governments have done to assess whether such documents exist and then the extent to which those documents are capable of being released, given the range of considerations and particularly privileges that may attach to any of them. Without wishing to pre-empt any of the thorough consideration that members of the executive might give to the motion, should it be passed I am sure they will go through that process quite thoroughly.

I think it is important to say that the motion and the document that is being sought do sit in a particularly important context about the government's policy ambitions to be delivering more homes across Victoria – 800,000 homes over the next decade is the ambition in the government's housing statement, building more homes obviously where Victorians want to live: near jobs, transport and services. A critical part of achieving this is making sure that we have the infrastructure and services in place in those communities to support those new homes being built and to ensure that the people who live there continue to access the kind of quality services that living in Victoria is all about. We need to build more homes to accommodate Victoria's growing population, and things like the growth areas infrastructure contribution are one of the mechanisms we have in place to help us do that. Obviously Mr Davis in his contribution made some remarks about the growth areas infrastructure contribution – the GAIC funds. I thought it was probably appropriate, therefore, to make a few remarks as well.

Recently the Premier and the Minister for Planning announced more than \$400 million for a package of initiatives funded through the growth areas infrastructure contribution – spending the fund that the contribution earlier said that the government was sitting on. We were sitting on an announcement of \$400 million that is out there in the community. That \$400 million is going to support 37 projects, and includes \$60 million to deliver a critical road link for the Ison Road overpass in Werribee, \$35 million towards a new school in Cobblebank, a \$29 million land purchase for a proposed school in Wyndham Vale and more than \$150 million for new bus services across Melbourne's north-west and south-east. Mr Galea and I were talking just last night about how important those new bus services are for his constituents in the south-east. There is \$10 million for an intersection upgrade at Mernda to support a future major recreation precinct and \$6 million for roads and traffic upgrades in Pakenham. This \$400 million complements more than \$685 million worth of initiatives the Labor government has already delivered across Melbourne's growth areas through the GAIC fund – things like ambulance stations, parks, schools and public transport.

We are investing to support infrastructure and services in our growth suburbs and in our growth communities. Those opposite might oppose us doing that. They may object to us spending this money in these areas, but their objections and their interjections are not going to stop this Labor government from investing in the services that our communities need. That is what our track record demonstrates over many years, and that is what our policy approach in the future will continue to deliver. This government is delivering more houses and more infrastructure to support the needs of the communities. We absolutely support these communities, and we absolutely believe that developer contributions are a key part of providing that infrastructure. That is what we are doing here, now and into the future.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:27): I also rise to speak today on notice of motion 390, which has been put to us by Mr Davis. It relates to, as my colleague Mr Batchelor has just outlined, infrastructure contribution funding, with particular reference made by Mr Davis to the growth areas infrastructure contribution fund. It is an important thing for us to be discussing in this place. We have a hugely strong growing economy in this state, and we have growing suburbs as a result of it. We have growing suburbs right across metropolitan and regional Victoria, but perhaps nowhere more so than in my region of the south-east, where we have places, such as Clyde North, which are absolutely booming. They are booming with the support of government investment, and they are booming with the support of the much-needed GAIC funding, especially with regard to what has just been announced in the past few weeks. Indeed, as Mr Batchelor said, over \$400 million worth of funding was announced, targeted to those areas that need it the most in our growth suburbs – in Casey, in Cardinia, in the north and the west, and in places like Hume, Wyndham and Melton as well. Particular to my interests of course are Casey and Cardinia, very fast-growing parts of Melbourne.

We have seen continued government investment – whether it be in schools, roads or hospitals; all of those things are taking place – and with the GAIC funding that was announced just a few weeks ago we have had some great wins for the south-east, including a new shared-use trail along Soldiers Road in the suburb of Berwick. And yes, I have spoken to Mr Batchelor and virtually anyone that will listen

in the past few weeks about the new bus services that we are getting in the south-east. It is fantastic to see this coming through. As our suburbs grow it is important that we provide the public transport options that people need as they move in. We have seen already in Clyde North, whether it has been through GAIC or similar contributions or through direct investment by this government, bus services actually being continually reformed and extended. Those routes that run east–west into Clyde North in particular have been repeatedly extended over the past few years so that as these suburbs grow there are strong and reliable bus services to connect their new residents. We saw that even indeed in last year's state budget, when some of the routes which were initially funded by developer contributions were actually locked in and backed in for when that period ended; the state budget last year locked in those extensions permanently. That is why it is so wonderful to see continued investments such as the extension of route 798, which runs from Cranbourne through to Clyde North and will now extend further into Clyde North. That is why it is so good to see the extension of route 831.

We have a new north–south corridor road that has just been built in the Berwick South and Clyde North area. It is called Bells Road. It runs parallel to Clyde Road, of course a busy major road. We are also investing in of course the Thompsons Road intersection upgrade, which is very exciting to see as well. That will have a big impact on easing traffic movement through that section. It is also really important that we have alternatives, and that is where Bells Road as a major–minor connector road comes in. That road only opened a few months ago in its first stages, which is why the 831 extension, which will run from Berwick down Bells Road, down through the southern parts of Berwick and into Clyde North, is so timely and so appropriate. It also, as I mentioned in a previous contribution, provides for that meshing network effect, so rather than just having to go one way, if you are in the new suburbs on the south side of Berwick or in Clyde North, you can go west to Cranbourne or north to Berwick. Whether it is the trains, whether it is the hospitals, whether it is the other services or whether it is the shops, you have got all those services at your doorstep.

Of course on top of that we are also going to see extensions of the 925 and 928 buses in the Pakenham area, which is slightly outside my region. The 928 extension, though, will have a big impact on those constituents of mine who live in the Beaconsfield area, again providing additional bus services to areas as they need them.

GAIC is a very important program. It is great to see this investment coming through. As we shift towards new planning policies that do try and ease the burden on our growing suburbs, as we try and shift that balance back towards appropriate and sensible development in our middle suburbs, these are the sorts of conversations that we can be having. As I say, it is for that reason that the government will not be opposing this motion today.

Motion agreed to.

Middle East conflict

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (10:33): I move:

That this house 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 which comprise agreements that the government has signed with:

- (1) Elbit Systems and its subsidiaries; and
- (2) the Israeli Ministry of Defense.

I rise to speak on this motion calling for the release of documents that relate to agreements the Victorian government has signed with Elbit Systems or its subsidiaries and the Israeli Ministry of Defense.

Seven months ago 1200 Israelis were killed by Hamas in a horrific attack that was condemned by this government. Since then the world has witnessed a relentless and indiscriminate siege on Gaza as the Palestinian people have been collectively punished. More than 34,000 people have been killed and over 77,000 injured, mostly women and children. One child is injured or dies every 10 minutes in

Gaza. More than 10,000 women have been killed, and over 19,000 children have been orphaned. Critical infrastructure has been reduced to rubble, including homes, electricity systems, water, sewerage and hospitals, leaving hundreds of thousands starving, homeless and facing growing rates of infectious diseases. There has been the deliberate targeting of aid workers and journalists; hundreds have been killed. Right now Israel is ordering the evacuation of Rafah, where 1.2 million Palestinians are sheltering. After being told to go there those in Rafah are now being subjected to bombardments.

According to Médecins Sans Frontières more than 85 per cent of the population of Gaza, almost 2 million people, have been forcibly displaced and are existing in unhealthy conditions. To quote MSF:

No place is safe from the bombing.

The suffering of Palestinians trapped Gaza can no longer be put into words.

Or according to Oxfam:

No-one and nowhere is safe.

People who survive the relentless airstrikes are living in overcrowded shelters, in tents, on the streets. With little food or clean water. If bombs don't kill them, disease or starvation are round the corner.

These are amongst many peak humanitarian agencies begging the world to act. They are crying out for governments to stop enabling the destruction of a people and cease arms deals with Israel.

The weapons being used by Israel are supported by deals with governments around the world, including Australia – including the Victorian Labor government. They made an agreement with Elbit industries to provide funding for their centre of excellence in 2021, and in 2022 they signed an MOU with the Israeli defence ministry. Since these agreements were entered into, the world has witnessed the Israeli state, aided by weapons developed and supplied by Elbit, kill and injure over 100,000 Palestinians. This has prompted many governments to reconsider their support for Israel. Even the Biden administration is talking about delaying weapons exports to Israel due to Israel's wilful failure to protect citizens. As Human Rights Watch have said:

Governments that continue to provide arms to the Israeli government risk complicity in war crimes.

Yet despite the horror the world is witnessing, Victorian Labor is refusing to end their agreements and, what is more, has refused to reveal how much money it gave to Israel's largest defence manufacturer and the terms of their MOU with the Israeli defence ministry.

Thousands upon thousands of people have been on our streets for seven months expressing their distress at the indiscriminate decimation of life and imploring our governments to act. Labor in Victoria cannot claim that they have no role in a conflict overseas when they are actively providing taxpayer funding to a company that is contributing directly to the bombing of Palestinians. This is complicity. When a government makes agreements like these and keeps them secret, despite all that has happened and continues to happen in Gaza, it is providing cover to the Israeli state to continue its actions. If the government stands by the deals, then be transparent. The Victorian public have a right to know.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:37): I rise to speak on Dr Mansfield's motion requesting the production of two documents in relation to the Israeli Ministry of Defense and Elbit Systems. I will say at the outset the government is not going to be opposing this motion.

I do want to start this contribution, particularly given some of the referencing and language used by Dr Mansfield, with the contribution I made on a motion on 17 October, when I said that in the maelstrom of conflict we cannot lose our shared humanity, and I ended that contribution with a call for peace. I want to reiterate that call today, and I think everybody in those communities wants peace.

But I also want to reiterate that the conduct of our debate has an impact on everyone, and it has an impact on those in our communities who have strong views, who are clearly affected by the horror

that was experienced on 7 October and the horrors that have been experienced since. While we must and should express our despair at violence and the lives of innocents that it takes across the community, we should do so without spreading lies. The extent to which this debate and these documents can help elucidate facts on matters that are being wilfully misrepresented in the public debate I think is welcome.

Some do not like to let facts get in the way of a good story, and we know that there is a political strategy because we read about it in the newspapers – well-briefed stories in the newspapers with quotes from elected members of the Greens that they are seeking to take advantage of political division in parts of Melbourne’s community to seek electoral gain.

Samantha Ratnam interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Well, it was in the *Age* on 4 April, Dr Ratnam. I do not think that we should seek political gain by exploiting division in our communities, particularly when it rests on campaigns of misinformation.

I will come very briefly to talk about these two documents, starting with the MOU with the Israeli government. The Victorian government has signed a non-binding MOU with the Israeli Ministry of Defense. The purpose of that is to support collaboration around manufacturing in Victoria. The MOU that has been signed with the Israeli Ministry of Defense is one of many – one of 8000 – that exist for Australian states with overseas entities. I think, importantly, under that MOU no projects have been identified. There are no joint projects currently underway under the scope of that MOU, and any campaign, any information in the public domain, that suggests that the Victorian government under this MOU has any projects with the Israeli defence ministry is a lie.

In relation to Elbit Systems, the agreements that the Victorian government has are with the Australian organisation, the Australian company Elbit Systems of Australia, to set up a centre of excellence in Melbourne, not elsewhere around the world, looking at the use of technology and innovation here in Victoria. It is the sort of thing that we do with many organisations around the world. It is about delivering development in Victoria with the Australian subsidiary of Elbit Systems, not with anyone overseas. We do not have a lot of time in this debate to go through that in a lot of detail.

I hope this brief contribution and the processes we might go through with the production of these documents help to bring some facts into the public debate to help stop the misinformation that is being wilfully distributed in our community, because it is doing people damage.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:42): I rise to speak to Dr Mansfield’s motion in relation to wanting documents to be released by the government regarding Elbit Systems and the Israeli Ministry of Defense. We know this is an incendiary motion given the actions of the Greens and their activist supporters over many months and, as Mr Batchelor has just said, the political strategy that is being used in relation to the terrible events that are occurring in the Middle East. I note that Dr Mansfield did not mention the events of 7 October and what occurred on that day. She talked about the indiscriminate deaths of innocent lives, and we know that there are still 130 Israelis held hostage. Nevertheless this documents motion –

Samantha Ratnam: On a point of order, Acting President, I seek your guidance. If a member is misconstruing what another member said – if we can go back to *Hansard* – I seek your guidance on how that can be corrected or what guidance should be given to the member, who might be misconstruing what another member said, which will be clear on the record, just a short while ago.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I believe Dr Mansfield may have referenced the 7 October attack, but I am happy for us to refer to *Hansard*.

Georgie CROZIER: I am happy for that to be corrected, and I am happy that Dr Mansfield did, given it was such an atrocity that occurred on that day. But it does not take away from this incendiary motion that is really designed to further stoke division and hate within the community. Nobody in

Victoria wants that. We have seen some very unfortunate and ugly events that have occurred, and I think that all of us do not want that to be pursued. This motion is designed for exactly those reasons. In relation to what is happening in the Parliament today around the Greens and what they are bringing into the Parliament and what they are doing, I say again this is not designed for what the vast majority of Victorians want. Obviously they want an ability to understand these matters, but what the Greens continue to do is use this as a way of fuelling those issues.

I know that this is a diversion from usual practice in this place around documents motions. I understand that, and I understand that there are members of the chamber who are concerned about that. It is not the first time that this has been undertaken, where the house has not agreed or there have been members of the house that have not agreed to documents being released. It does not happen often; it happens very rarely. But in this instance we think this motion, as I said, is not there for the motives that the Greens are actually stating. They know that there are issues around national security or issues around, as I say, the Israeli Ministry of Defense. Any issues around national security cannot be released; government cannot release that, understandably.

In response to this I say again that whilst we are diverging from usual practices in this, this is something that the Liberals and Nationals believe is being used by the Greens and their activist supporters to further inflame the divisive argument out in the community. We do not think that is appropriate whatsoever, and in this instance we will not be supporting the documents motion.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (10:46): I too will be opposing this motion. I do not normally do it, but I will pick up what Ms Crozier said before: I believe this is nothing more than a stunt. They know quite well that executive privilege or national security will be called as a reason for getting nothing. If the government for once gave us a blank sheet of paper, they would be justified. What else are we doing this for?

Let us have a look at what happened. We all know on 7 October there was a massacre. It just seems to me that is a prelude to everything else that has happened, which is true. Let us have a look at the difference. A motion by leave this morning mentioned that 1 million Palestinians were advised to move. That does not sound like what happened on 7 October, when 1200 to 1400 Israeli civilians, which included other nationals and included Arab Israelis, were given no warning whatsoever. They were gunned down in their homes, they were murdered, they were raped. Babies were decapitated. Babies were burnt alive deliberately, not as an act of war, not as an unfortunate thing of war. Let us be honest, what is happening in Gaza is disgusting. The death of civilians is disgusting. What is happening to the men, women and children that are non-combatants is disgusting. But it just seems to be by the by, what happened to the 1200 or 1400 civilians in Israel. It just seems to be, 'We'll mention that at the beginning, and then we'll move on.'

There are also some other facts. In 2006 Hamas were elected with Fatah to run, I think, the Legislative Council in Gaza. Fatah lost the toss and have gone nowhere, so what we are left with is Hamas with its ministry of health, which releases all the stuff that everyone parrots. They treat it like it is a government, and then they say, 'No, Hamas is not the government.' If anyone wants peace in Gaza, call for Hamas to surrender. Call for Hamas to give back the hostages. I can pretty well guarantee the second that happens it will all stop. To call for a ceasefire means Hamas will live on; it means Hamas will reorganise, as they have done since 2006, and Hamas will do this again.

I myself may not be Jewish. My daughter is. Hamas and the people that actively physically support them would kill my daughter – I will not stand for that – just because she is Jewish. I will oppose this, and I am appalled at this stunt and appalled at the wearing of the keffiyehs in here. The Greens knew full well that they would be told not to. I mean, the disgusting things that were said about Mr Puglielli before – we cannot support that sort of thing. Hamas throw gays off buildings for being gay. I do not get it – I really do not get it. I oppose this.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:49): I have got a short time to make a contribution on this. In my first speech I outlined the fact that in Victoria a part of what I love so much is our diversity and that the people who come from the many nations on earth bring their art, their food, their sport and that culture that makes Victoria everything that it is and makes us an example to the world, both the communities that we build and the economic success we build together. However, we often see risk to this in politics. We have seen it in politics in recent elections, and it has been rejected, whether it is race, whether it is economic situation, whether it is postcode, whether it is gender or whether it is sexual orientation. We have seen these sorts of items used for politics, and we are seeing this resurgent around the world. We must stand against this. We have heard contributions this morning similarly. We have got IDAHOBIT coming up on Friday. We absolutely must stand united in an inclusive and a respectful society here in Victoria.

I will come to this short-form docs motion and the politics that has gone on around it. I have just been looking at a Greens social media post, one of many posters, communications and whatnot: ‘Vic Labor, stop arming Israel!’ This is in no way appropriate for people who want to stand in this place, for people who want to form political parties, to lead our communities. This is not the way to do this. We have a horrible conflict in the Middle East, and we have big Jewish and Muslim communities in Victoria. We need to be doing everything we can to work towards peace, and peace needs leadership. So telling Victorians that this government, the state they live in, is arming Israel is really, really beyond the pale, and it is really setting up some potentially bad outcomes. It is just adding to what we do not need, absolutely what we do not need in this state.

There are a lot of good people in the Greens with very good intentions. However, there are some within the party that are ruthless careerists. I saw this four or five years ago in Darebin. The biggest branch of the Victorian Greens ripped themselves to shreds, and it was not the majority of the membership. They were shocked by what they saw by a small number of careerists at the top who did not care about the outcomes, whether it was for the party or the broader community; they cared about where they wanted to get to. I think this language that we have seen in their communications is an example of that. So I think you need to have a very good look within your organisation. We can have respectful debate, as the President has talked about today, in the way that we communicate what we bring to this place and what we discuss, but when absolute, blatant mistruths are being put out into the community, that is absolutely wrong.

I will stand here and support this short-form docs motion. Let us absolutely bring it to the community. With these MOUs, there are 8000 MOUs set up with national and subnational organisations around this world. This MOU is an envelope; there is nothing within it. My understanding is –

Samantha Ratnam: Show it to us, then.

Tom McINTOSH: That is exactly why I will stand here and support this motion, because any claim that this MOU is supporting the Israeli military is false and is a lie, and the lies have to stop. Victorians need to hear the truth.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (15): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Motion agreed to.

*Bills***Hemp Industry Bill 2024***Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Rachel Payne:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (11:00): I rise to speak on the Hemp Industry Bill 2024, which has been brought before us by the Legalise Cannabis Party. I recall the second-reading speech last sitting week by Ms Payne, and I do certainly want to begin by paying my acknowledgements to Ms Payne and her colleague here Mr Ettershank for the work that they have done to bring this bill before us today. I acknowledge their broader advocacy, which has been truly to promote hemp products but also drive economic benefit, really, in our state.

My colleagues on the Economy and Infrastructure Committee certainly examined this in great detail last year with the inquiry into the industrial hemp industry in Victoria. My thanks to the members of that committee for the work that they did. I certainly managed to pick up a copy of the final report of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee inquiry into the industrial hemp industry in Victoria. What I do note, interestingly, is that we are still awaiting a government response to that inquiry, and with that in mind I think it does certainly lend itself to some very interesting reading for the various ministers and others to consider. For me, I think I would rather wait until we hear from the government in their final response to the inquiry, and some elements of this bill really do anticipate, I believe, the government's response to the inquiry.

I noted with great interest, having read over that a little while ago – I think it was late last year when I got my hands on it – that the committee investigated various aspects of the Victorian industrial hemp industry, including current issues, some of the barriers that exist in Victoria, some of the opportunities, environmental impacts, which I understand were entirely positive, and how hemp and the growth of the industrial hemp industry can aid in our efforts here in Victoria to reduce our emissions. Of course, as a state with some very firm emissions targets, that was pleasing reading. Importantly, the report lays out proposals for a potential hemp industry plan for our state, and I am particularly keen to see how some of those ideas laid out in the inquiry report will be considered before we act on the bill before us. I know that the government recognises the increasing interest in the industrial hemp sector. There are many promising prospects for local businesses, and of course there is the creation of jobs. I note with great interest that a great number of those jobs would be in regional Victoria. More details with respect to that, I understand, will come from government in due course. It does I think open our eyes a little, having this bill before us and the inquiry, to the enormous opportunities of the hemp industry.

I had the opportunity yesterday to pop in with a number of colleagues and interested folk from our media and others to the hemp industry showcase. I have to say it was a little eye-opening for me. I did not know the depth of the hemp industry and the opportunities for it, particularly when it comes to building materials and building and construction – that was especially enlightening, I have got to say. I had thought about it more in terms of rope and clothing and beauty products and other lines, so for me to understand that there is enormous opportunity for the building industry, particularly with respect to fire safety, as well as, interestingly, given that we have just had a short-form documents motion on the defence industry, in fact some defence opportunities that are being currently explored by the government. For me that was certainly a very eye-opening session, so can I just pass my thanks to the industry personnel who were able to come along and share those opportunities with us. Thanks for sticking around and for your patience. What I understand from my conversations there with various folks is that there are some challenges. There are some barriers, and some that were highlighted to me by the folks at the stand were particularly around integration with the building codes and why it is that there are some additional barriers for the implementation of hemp products into mainstream building products.

The other point that was raised to me was about some testing that needs to take place, particularly with respect to, I think, fire safety and others. Some of the initial tests that I have seen demonstrated on a video were incredibly, incredibly positive, and I think as we become more and more exposed to more frequent extreme weather events in our state as a result of climate change I am reminded that perhaps there are solutions not too far from here.

I want to just go to the fact that what we have before us is a standalone act for the hemp industry, and what I understand is that it does offer really minimal advantages when it comes to its place as a standalone act versus the existing regulatory framework. I understand the folks from Agriculture Victoria have a view on this, so I thank them for the work that they have done. But certainly it is viewed as comparable to standalone acts in other states, the work that we are doing here to promote the hemp industry. Indeed only Victoria and Queensland lack standalone acts, and I thought that that was particularly worth noting. But the overall regulatory regime generally matches that of the other jurisdictions, and there is a view that there are no significant implications when compared to the other states that do indeed have standalone acts.

In the absence, really, of what is a government response to the inquiry, there are of course things that still need to be considered as risks associated with creating a standalone act. Particularly I am thinking about stakeholder interest and expectations there, and that is something we will certainly need to consider in the time ahead. But the truth is that this is a growing industry. Whilst it might be small right now, with the opportunities that I saw yesterday across clothing, manufacturing, defence, beauty and, interestingly, building and construction I think we will, if given the right measures of support, see this industry grow.

I know that work has already taken place to grow the hemp industry in our state. I think I have perhaps spoken about this before in a previous point brought before the Parliament, but I want to go over the investment that we have made as part of the AgriFutures Australia emerging industries program, which does recognise industrial hemp as a high-growth sector due to its versatile applications – anyone that went upstairs yesterday will be able to tell you that that is very much the truth – and its strong suitability as a sustainable crop. As such, the program supports research and development and has invested in a series of trials with a focus on improving hemp varieties, production methods and sustainability.

There is of course the hemp variety trials program, which is about industrial hemp varieties, and in that what we have seen is that there are some identified priorities under the Australian industrial hemp strategic plan that assess various varieties across the different regions. We know that the diversity of Australia's agricultural growing regions is incredibly vast, and with that comes enormous opportunity. As part of the work a trial has been identified for further investment here in our state, particularly in Hamilton, Victoria. One of these national trials has really highlighted that there are agreed varieties of the crop that we could be continuing to examine. The second year of the trial there in Hamilton resulted in a more consistent yield across the varieties, with a third year expected to provide Agriculture Victoria with some much more robust datasets as we continue this work.

The Australian carbon credit unit scheme is overseen by the Commonwealth government, but it is worth noting here it does manage the creation of new credit-generating activities within the framework, as I have just spoken about. It was good to see that there is really a connection between the opportunities for the growth of the hemp industry and of course our response to climate change. We are a state that does pride itself on taking action on climate, with some very, very ambitious emissions reduction goals of 75 to 80 per cent by 2035, and of course we are seeking to hit net zero emissions by 2045, which will be here before we know it. Of course we have advocated for the advancement of methods that effectively acknowledge the existing emissions reduction efforts and encourage the development of innovative strategies and industries that can robustly support our emissions targets. It may well be that crops of industrial hemp play a role in our climate action endeavours, but importantly I think it is worth us considering a pause while we wait for the government to consider what is a very substantial report into industrial hemp.

There are some more stats and facts and figures that come to mind, but I think the showcase yesterday did truly highlight to me that opportunities abound for the progress of the hemp industry here in our state. One of the facts that came to me from one of the exhibitors – and I did take his name down; I believe it was David – is that any form of the crops that are particularly being used or permitted in the industrial hemp environment contains no more than 1 per cent THC, and time and time again the crop results are showing that they are in fact keeping within those guidelines. So a big thankyou for the efforts of folks that are trying their very best to grow in what is an emerging industry. I certainly applaud them for that.

I can assure the house before us that the current regulations are in fact policed by Agriculture Victoria inspectors. They are all about our state. They inspect right from the seeds used for the sowing through to cultivation, harvesting and processing. No licences used by Agriculture Victoria – let me just reinforce this point – can authorise the processing of leaves and the flowering heads. That is really where the cannabinoids – I do not know how to pronounce that; I might need help from my colleagues to my right – are found. I know also that one of the concerns that does come up and was raised by some folks at the showcase yesterday is around perception of engagement with criminal outfits, and of course crime prevention is facilitated certainly through Agriculture Victoria. The very firm view of those industry folks is that they are very keen to see this thrive and grow as an industry in its own right, and their very strong message is that licences are not granted to individuals with a history of serious offences or deemed unsuitable for crop-related activities. The folks that I speak to are engineers, they are architects, they are researchers and they are scientists. They are very much committed to this advancement of the industry. Thank you for making that clear to me but also to all the exhibitors that came along.

Can I leave us with the fact that Victoria's current regulatory regime keeps us safe and gives some clear guidance to our stakeholders in this emerging industrial hemp industry and its enterprises that there is a way forward. There have been investments, there are trials, there is testing and there are inspectors. I just want to assure people that we are doing what we can in the meantime while we wait for the government's response to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's report on the inquiry into industrial hemp in Victoria. I thank Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank again for bringing this before us and opening certainly my eyes to the enormous opportunities of industrial hemp.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (11:16): I rise to speak to the private members bill that Ms Payne has brought to the house, the Hemp Industry Bill 2024. This bill re-enacts, with amendments, the law relating to the cultivation and processing of industrial hemp for certain authorised purposes, as has been outlined in the second-reading speech around what is currently facing the industry. We have just heard from Ms Watt also, who spoke of some of the uses of industrial hemp. Industrial hemp has a low tetrahydrocannabinol level, and it has a wide range of applications. It is actually used in various things – for paper, rope, stockfeed, building materials and pet food. There are a wide range of applications that industrial hemp can be used for.

Last year the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee tabled their report in November. It outlined what the committee was doing, the terms of reference, and made a number of recommendations in relation to them. One of the recommendations was to streamline existing licensing requirements:

Areas for improvement should include reducing the administrative burden on the sector where possible ...

Really this is what this bill goes to, in terms of streamlining and taking away those barriers. The committee found that there were significant barriers, and I would also say that that is not new. The barriers to hemp growing in this state are something that have been around for a long time.

In 1997 the then Minister for Agriculture and Resources, the Honourable Pat McNamara, introduced the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances (Amendment) Bill 1997, looking at THC and hemp

utilisation – exactly what we are discussing today, if you can believe it. I read from his second-reading speech:

In July 1995 the government approved a three-year field research program, at up to 10 field sites, to test low-THC hemp – cannabis – varieties containing less than 0.35 per cent of the psychoactive component THC ...

There were a number of bodies that were involved. He goes on to speak about the syndicates that were looking at that, and it was not only farmers but also research bodies and others with a commercial interest. They were looking at, really, those field trials and how they were going – at the time they were promising – and also made the point that further research was required. That was back in 1997; now we are in 2024. There was quite a lot of movement from the Liberals and Nationals at that point in time, and I think that has to be said. Labor have been in power in this state for –

Melina Bath: Too long.

Georgie CROZIER: way too long, Ms Bath, you are quite right – 21 of the last 25 years.

We have got this issue that you have brought to the house today, Ms Payne, which really just goes to those points: to create a standalone act to deal with industrial hemp; to amend the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 to repeal part IVA, authorities for low-THC cannabis; and to retain existing provisions dealing with authorities for industrial hemp, applications, conditions, renewals, suspensions, cancellations of authorities, protected information, and VCAT review, inspection and enforcement. It also increases the maximum hemp licence term from three to five years. I note that the inquiry also looked into that.

As we have talked about, this is for the agricultural industry. We will gladly look at this, and I think that there has been general support within agriculture to look at this under those applications that I have spoken about. Even the report that I referred to on the industrial hemp industry in Victoria that the Economy and Infrastructure Committee did talks about applications. The committee heard that industrial hemp could play an important role in the future of Victoria's regional economy. They make a point about the timber industry, which has been absolutely decimated. I know Ms Bath is well aware of this, because she has been fighting that and has represented her constituents exceptionally well in this place talking about those issues. That industry has been wiped out.

This is a really important component of rebuilding our agricultural industry. As somebody who has come from that industry myself, growing up in far western Victoria, I know the huge amounts of extraordinary work that the agriculture industry does, what it does for the economy of the state, how it is exceptionally important for our rural and regional areas and how it really makes for a thriving Victoria as part of our overall economy. I think for far too long many members of the government have not actually appreciated the importance of the agricultural industry.

Melina Bath interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: There are so many applications – food and fibre – and look at what is happening. We have got some real challenges in that space.

To get back to this bill, it is one where we obviously want to support the agriculture industry. We think this bill does that. Labor quite frankly have an appalling track record on supporting agriculture. We saw in this year's budget a 30 per cent cut over the last two years, and there are other programs that have been cut. That has not been lost amongst those in the industry who are working so hard to make their living and for their businesses to survive and thrive.

In relation to this bill, I want to place on record again that this is something that has been on the books for a long, long time. I note the member said that the government was looking at this. Given the report that I referred to, they should get a wriggle on. They have had many, many years to get on with it and reduce those barriers and ensure that for this part of hemp that we are talking about – industrial hemp – those barriers go and we can have a thriving industry in this state because, God, we need all the help

we can get at the moment with the rising debt and an increasing burden on future taxpayers to pay down Labor's appalling record in that regard.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:24): I also rise to speak on the Hemp Industry Bill 2024 brought forward by Ms Payne. This bill seeks to create a new, separate act and pull the controls of hemp out of the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981. I would say from the outset that the Libertarian Party will be supporting this bill, although – and I am sure Ms Payne would agree with me on this – I feel that it is totally unnecessary to do this. The reason that it has been necessary for this bill to come before this house is because of cannabis prohibition.

It is worth looking at some of the history of hemp in Australia. In fact the first time hemp seeds were brought into Australia was actually on the First Fleet. Sir Joseph Banks had high hopes – 'high' hopes – that there would be a great industry in Australia and that Australia might be suitable for hemp production. They considered it a valuable crop even back then for many, many things, such as paper and rope. I also went to the display yesterday to have a talk to some of these people that are looking at developing products around hemp, and we know that we can also use it for construction materials and foodstuffs and many, many other things.

In I think 1925 we had a convention on banning a whole bunch of drugs, including cannabis. In fact it is thought that in the 19th century in Australia cannabis consumption was quite widespread – at the time when this place was built – and there were no restrictions at all on cannabis. In fact anyone could just grow it, and the same with hemp. It is a shame that Australia went down the erroneous path of prohibiting cannabis, with the unintended consequence of retarding and destroying, effectively, the hemp industry for a very long time. So now we are playing catch-up. We are trying to look at product development and research on what sorts of things hemp could be useful for, including even more advanced uses such as plastics, and I note that many countries now use things like hemp seeds for foodstuffs, food supplements and things like this. There are many, many opportunities that have been lost, and we have to catch up on them. One way to do that is to make it easier for people to grow, process, use, do research into hemp et cetera.

My view and indeed my party's view on this is that cannabis and hemp should have far less regulation. In fact my view on cannabis is that the regulations should be that you should not sell it to children and the regulations for hemp should be similar to those for rosemary or parsley – there should be very little regulation whatsoever. It should be the freest market that we can provide to enable farmers and factories and researchers to do whatever they want with hemp – to produce new products and develop new products and make money, and even export products – for Australia and for Victoria. But thus far it has been very hard. You have to go through all these licensing and testing provisions; you have to go through all these hoops and hurdles that just make it so hard.

I do note that there are many potential applications for hemp – to replace either construction materials or other fibre crops – which seem very appealing, but we are not going to know for a fact whether that is economic or not until we allow it to compete in the free market and let that decide whether or not that is actually an economic thing. But certainly some of the research and development that has been happening is very, very promising. Indeed I was quite impressed yesterday by the construction materials for roofing, flooring, walls and insulation – all hemp. Is this going to replace pink batts? Is it going to replace galvanised iron on roofs and stuff? Well, let us let the market decide on that. I think that there are many potential opportunities. If these people that want to develop these products want to invest in them and want to try and sell them to consumers, then by all means let them do so.

I would note that there is another related issue here. Because of, again, over-regulation of the construction industry, one thing that was relayed to me yesterday, which I am very sympathetic to, is that there are very strict rules around construction materials. It would be I think in the government's and the economy's and Victorians' best interest if we streamlined that for innovators. One of the problems with regulation is you set in stone the current state of things and you make it very hard for innovation and new products to enter the market, and I think that is the problem these researchers and

developers are facing at the moment with construction materials, because roofing products, for example, are all based around conventional materials, such as ceramics and metals, not around hemp, and therefore they have to go through this great big process to prove that you can actually make a roof out of hemp that is suitable. I acknowledge that there need to be some standards on these sorts of things, but nevertheless they could make it a lot easier for these people to get those tests over the line and get them approved so that people can start building houses, if they choose to do so, out of these materials.

I welcome this development. Regardless of whether or not this bill passes, I urge the government to do whatever it can to get out of the way of people that want to grow, develop and consume hemp and let this industry flourish.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:30): I rise to make a contribution on this bill that has been brought by the Legalise Cannabis Party. I just want to note that the government thanks Ms Payne for her work on this private members bill and of course her broader advocacy in regard to hemp products. What I will say is that I think our view is that the bill that has been brought before the Parliament today pre-empts the government's response to the inquiry into the industrial hemp industry in Victoria. That inquiry was conducted by a committee of the Parliament to look at the issues, barriers and opportunities within the current Victorian industrial hemp industry. I have had the benefit of hearing Mr Limbrick's contribution as well. I note that the hemp industry were in here yesterday and members had the opportunity to go upstairs and have a look at the many varied products that are available from that sector. There is a varied range of things that are available, whether from clothing to construction to food and the like. There is a varied product range that people might want to avail themselves of.

Just going back to the committee inquiry for a moment, the committee, as I said, looked into the barriers and opportunities within the current Victorian industrial hemp industry, comparing the industry to other jurisdictions and looking at constraints to expanding the industry in Victoria; some of the environmental benefits and costs of an expanded industry – how industrial hemp can best be utilised and the like and how, for example, that also might assist in meeting our emissions reduction targets; and how the government could potentially support the development of that sector or industry and how that might assist the Victorian economy as well. The government wants to acknowledge that there is a growing interest in the Victorian hemp industry and that does represent a growing set of opportunities for local businesses, and the government will no doubt have more to say in regard to that.

As I said, there is a varied number of hemp products. I was just reading through some of the notes – I will get back to the issue about the bill in a moment – but certainly just in regard to hemp seed as food, I find that interesting because I know there is a growing area of interest in the health sector around different foods and seeds and how they can actually assist people. When you talk about health food as a particular area, it has got an interesting background. I think that many, many years ago people used to assume that 'hemp' meant marijuana and that was what you were consuming necessarily. There are a whole bunch of different things around it, and I think as time has progressed there has been a growing understanding and development of different products in that area.

In April 2017, following consideration by the Australia and New Zealand ministerial forum on food regulation, the Australian New Zealand Food Standards Code was amended to permit low-THC hemp hulled seeds to be sold or used as an ingredient in food. That was not that long ago – it was 2017 – so here we are. The changes to the Food Standards Code then started on 12 November 2017. Of course, after that decision was made, you still needed a licence in Victoria to cultivate or process industrial hemp and seeds which were deemed as non-therapeutic, or not for medicinal purposes – obviously seeds for consumption as food. Licences for industrial hemp are issued by Agriculture Victoria. To apply for a licence applicants are still required to provide a national criminal history check for themselves and their associates, a credit report, a business and research plan and information about the proposed growing site as part of the application process, and site assessments are also generally

required. So there is a high degree of regulation and scrutiny around the production of industrial hemp seeds for non-therapeutic use. I note that Mr Limbrick's contribution was all about that we need to have no regulation or very little, but there are very good reasons for these things. Again, it is still important to have a degree of regulation around this sort of sector and also to make sure that there is sustainable development of an industry. It is important that there is still some rigour and checks around these sorts of things.

Non-therapeutic uses of industrial hemp also include things like fibre, cosmetics and – as I have been talking about – food. As Mr Limbrick commented about, with the display that was in here this week, hemp is also used for construction. There was some discussion around hemp being a very strong fibre and being used for walls as it is quite strong and resistant to damage or breakage from blunt force and things of the like. It is always good to see other products coming on the market. They say there is a usage, but I am not sure what the uptake of that is. Certainly in regard to cosmetics, similarly, I am not sure what the uptake is, and also in regard to food. We have talked about hemp seeds and the like and there are other sorts of oils and whatnot that can be utilised.

Again, there is a strong framework around wanting to prevent criminal activity in regard to the cultivation and processing of low-THC cannabis. Agriculture Victoria will not issue an authority to grow low-THC cannabis if, for example – and there is a range of things around what would preclude somebody from being successfully considered for a licence; obviously if anybody has committed a crime, and they are quite serious offences – someone has been found guilty, or an applicant or an associate, within the last 10 years of a serious offence. Serious offences mean indictable offences involving dishonesty, fraud or assault, an offence under the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 or any offence with a penalty of imprisonment of more than one year et cetera. Again, it is serious crime; it is not misdemeanour-type things. Obviously the government wants to ensure that any criminal elements are not permitted to make some kind of industry or living that might be considered criminal. It is important to continue to ensure that there are rigorous standards enforced in that sector.

I just return to the merits of a standalone act. The government's position on this is that a standalone act is likely to deliver only minimal benefits other than the current regulatory framework, and I have touched on some of the aspects around the regulatory framework, particularly, as I have just mentioned, in regard to food. Agriculture Victoria's advice is that their position is that they consider that the current regulatory framework is operating well and that Victoria and Queensland are the only states without a standalone act but there are no other substantive implications compared to other jurisdictions and there would be risks associated with managing stakeholders in regard to that standalone act. I think the view of the government is that the industry is small but the expectation is that there would still be strong stakeholder interest, given the recent inquiry and the advocacy around a range of potential amendments.

If I reflect on the government's last term in Parliament – or it might have even been the term before that – I know there was a substantial amount of work being done in a range of areas. I know Ms Patten from the Reason Party, who was in this Parliament last term, certainly strongly advocated for issues around medicinal cannabis. It is not the first time that I have said in this Parliament that I myself have had medicinal cannabis prescribed to me for back pain. It is something that I have had to use quite scarcely and sparsely, but it is a product that works. I note that the current thinking is it can be different in its application for different people, but that does not mean to say that it does not have some usefulness – of course it does.

Just turning back to what is happening in regard to the government's investment in that hemp industry, as I said, government obviously had to help assist the development of that product to come to market, so there were a range of things that our government did to help that product be developed. But a nationally coordinated industrial hemp variety trials program is also covering the current and future major production environments, which was identified as a key priority in the *Australian Industrial Hemp Strategic RD&E Plan*, which was a plan that was to span from 2022 to 2027. It is part of the AgriFutures Australia emerging industries program, and it is supporting the expansion of the

Australian industry through a \$2.5 million program to support research focusing on improved hemp seeds and varieties, production methods, industrial sustainability and the development of hemp-based products. That investment has happened at a national level, and the three-year industrial hemp variety trials program is to go into its second year, providing valuable information to Australian hemp growers to assess different hemp seeds and dual-purpose varieties suitable for different regions across the country. There you go. You learn something new every day in this job, don't you – lots of things that you did not know happened. But it is important to make sure that any trial program that is being supported at a national level can be done in such a way that it can assist industry to grow.

Importantly, trial sites have been established in nine locations across Australia. That includes the Northern Territory; South Australia, where there are two sites; Tasmania; Victoria; Western Australia, where there are two sites; New South Wales; and Queensland. In 2022–23 the trial at Hamilton included two times of sowing: one was on 9 November and the second one was on 20 December. Getting right down into the weeds – pardon the pun – the grain yield of 10 varieties trialled ranged from 1.7 to 2.66 tetrahydrocannabinolic acid, with Fedora 17 the most consistent yielding variety over both sowing times, yielding an average of 2.5 THCA. There you go. It just goes to show that some varieties will have a better yield than others, and it is important to understand why and how that is. Again, getting right down into the weeds about different crops and different varieties, there are lots of things that are emerging from those trials that we can learn from and better understand. The results presented in the report under the trial conditions are indicative of the region; however, another year's data is required to provide a more robust dataset. Again, we are still learning and watching what is happening out of that trial to determine what the next steps might be.

In regard to current cultivation in Victoria, low-THC cannabis cultivars are of the genus *cannabis* L, which has very low levels of tetrahydrocannabinol, otherwise known as THC. Under the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act low-THC cannabis means that the leaves, flowers and heads do not contain more than 1.0 per cent of the psychoactive chemical compound THC. Again, this is the psychoactive one, and I note that with the cannabis oil, the one that I was prescribed definitely had the THC in it. Some do not; some do. That is something that depends on what you are experiencing, and for the pain that I was experiencing the medical practitioner determined that I should have that one. It was effective for me in regard to pain, but I noticed that it was something that I did not need to take on a regular basis. It seemed to break that nexus, so that was quite useful for me.

In any event, I note that the clock is going to beat me. There is much more that I could say on this, and I know other people in the chamber will also want to make their contribution in regard to this. But still there is a lot more information that we will see come out of these trials. It is something that I know the sector is continuing to grow and develop. We are seeing lots of different uses for industrial hemp, and I will continue to watch with interest in regard to the progress of this sector.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:45): I am pleased to rise to speak on the Hemp Industry Bill 2024 and in doing so state that the Nationals certainly do not have an opposition to this bill. In fact it was the National Party and indeed the Honourable Patrick McNamara almost 30 years ago who instigated reform in the agricultural use of hemp. This bill re-enacts the amendments and the law relating to the cultivation and processing of industrial hemp for certain specified purposes. We have heard from others in this debate and indeed from the cannabis party, aptly named for this particular bill, that it is using low tetrahydrocannabinol, so low THC, for non-medicinal use. I think that is something that I hope this house can get on board with.

A few years ago, when I first came in, in 2015, the portfolio of agriculture had been handballed between Labor members. I am not sure why, but it is a portfolio that I know the Nationals would love to grab and hold on to. At the time I participated in and very much enjoyed attending a number of agricultural seminars, and the Honourable Jaala Pulford was the minister for ag. At one or more of those forums there was a gentleman by the name of Charles Kovess. He met me then and espoused the virtues of hemp in a variety of forms, and that was nine years ago. He met me again at Lardner

field day, Farm World field day, where the Nationals have had a tent, a stall, for nine years. Indeed Charles came over and said hello wearing his hemp hat, again espousing the virtues of it.

I am certainly interested from an agricultural point of view in the importance of growing hemp in a variety of applications. We know that across Australia 2500 hectares are being used, with about 500 licensees holding that in the past two years. But in Victoria you are only looking at under 200 hectares and certainly that trial crop in Hamilton that we have heard about today. So we need to expand by reducing this regulatory burden on this low THC. I heard a very real comment that I was going to use about how it came out with Joseph Banks centuries ago.

There are some interesting applications I think we should all have the opportunity to think about and maybe use. I know that there is hemp underwear – I am aware of that. I think one of my local health food shops may be able to import it, but what about manufacturing that in Victoria? Hemp fibre can be used as a natural mulch, so I guess that is a lower grade emphasis, but we need to keep moisture in our soil and also regulate the temperature of soil for better production. It can be used in mat form for soil erosion, and again we need to be stabilising those slopes where we have got some undulation in the topography. It can be used in that. It can be used in composting and for aeration and nutrient content, to enrich our soil. Again I am sure most of the people in this place have got their compost bins and are aerating them – well, they are probably not aerating them as we speak, but they have them in their home backyards. Animal bedding, again for livestock, is important, and plant support. It has got that fibrous nature. It grows very quickly, and it can be used for climbing plants. Isn't it appropriate that you have got plants helping other plants to grow? It can be used in paper production and hemp-pulp biodegradable packaging – and I will speak to that in a minute – soil amendments and also animal feeds. Its lightweight nature certainly lends itself – and I know others have far more experience in this than me – to building products and also to helping keep and regulate temperature. Those fire-resistant properties lend themselves to the building industry. It is versatile; I think that is one of the major comments that I would make. Hemp can also be used in textiles, paper, building, abrasive chemicals, oils, inks and cosmetics.

We see from the upper house committee report – I think it was the Economy and Infrastructure Committee – that they investigated this in depth. I am not on that committee, but I am quoting the report:

The Committee heard that industrial hemp could play an important role in the future of Victoria's regional economy. Although the regional economy is mostly strong, there are areas facing tough challenges, such as the timber industry and parts of agriculture looking to transition to new crops.

As my colleague Georgie Crozier has said, I think that the closure of the native timber industry is one of the biggest policy blights on this government or even any government. We talk about food and fibre, and we see that the Latrobe Valley Authority it is about to lose its cap and merge, in effect, with RDV, Regional Development Victoria. If we go onto their website, they talk about food and fibre. Well, in terms of fibre from a renewable resource, like hemp, native timber is a renewable resource, just in a different form: hardwood timber. I find this is an abomination of this government. Indeed if you go to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2019 fourth report, in terms of fibre, which is what this is about, a sustainable yield from a well-managed hardwood plantation or hardwood forestry is the best outcome and mitigates climate change. So the government can throw their hands up at one industry, and indeed in effect they are going to say they will bring this back in a better form. Well, they will probably just put an extra full stop and then bring back this private members bill that we have seen today.

Just talking a little bit about what happened previously, back in July 1995 the then Liberal and Nationals government – that was the Kennett and McNamara government – approved a three-year industrial hemp field research trial, and very worthy it was. It amended the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 to remove legislative barriers and encourage the expansion of this new fibre. If we go back to 2015, when the then ag minister was standing in agricultural expos and

forums, you have to ask, if the government nine years ago said it was a good idea, why hasn't the government taken it up until now? Why is it only now looking at it? I just feel that the government has been very tardy at enabling agriculture and the fibre industry.

We know that this Labor government has had an appalling track record on the agricultural sector. We know that in the past two years it has cut \$190 million out of the agricultural budget – 30 per cent has been cut in the past two years. The wild dog management program, the wild dog bounty, has been cut, and of course we also know that roads have been cut. To get fibre, whether it be from industrial hemp or any other sort of fibre, you need roads, and this government is cutting roads and putting productivity and also human life at risk. During the bill briefing – thank you very much for that bill briefing – it was made clear that only seeds of low-THC hemp would be provided through a regulated mechanism and would be allowed to be grown, and of course then in that situation there needs to be rigour around the testing and licensing arrangements.

As I have said, the Nationals have always backed our farmers. We also know that our farmers are leading the world in technology and in embracing ways to carbon sink and to improve soil health and productivity. These sorts of new initiatives – well, they are in fact very old initiatives – need to be ramped up in Victoria and are not something that I would stand in the way of. I look forward to this industry advancing in Victoria in the very near future.

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (11:56): I rise to make a brief contribution on the Hemp Industry Bill 2024. How do I love hemp? Let me count the ways – but I digress. I did seriously consider subjecting you all to another sonnet, but I felt I had no chance when compared with my colleague's very eloquent example in her second-reading speech, so you are all spared. Instead, before I dig in to the details of this fit-for-purpose industrial hemp legislation, I thought I would tell you a bit about one of the thousands of ways that hemp is currently being used.

Hempcrete is a mixture of hemp hurd and lime-based binder, and it can serve as a substitute for energy-intensive concrete- and brick-based construction. Some of its fantastic carbon-efficient properties include storage of captured carbon over its lifetime, excellent thermal and noise insulation, fire and vermin resistance, faster construction compared to traditional materials and mould resistance. Given the horrendous environmental impact of the cement industry, one of the largest producers of carbon dioxide globally, any alternative we can find, no matter the scale, must be taken seriously.

Some Victorians have already got a healthy head start on hempcrete. A couple in Victoria are hand-building their dream home from hempcrete, citing their distaste for morgue-like concrete panels, and they have already started to notice the benefits. One day it was 7 degrees outside but 21 degrees inside. On another day it was 12 degrees outside but 21 degrees inside. As a more extreme example, we saw at the exhibition yesterday the hemp cave – a very innovative project designed to be highly fire-resistant. We actually saw 4000 litres of propane burnt to test this hemp cave, and whilst it was 1800 degrees outside, it was 32 degrees inside. That is an extraordinary achievement, and this is from a product that is still in the early days of much of its development. In other words, hempcrete provides us with a very innovative and exciting product that also can save money for consumers in terms of, for example, heating and cooling.

Even my own neighbours have just recently built a hempcrete extension to their house using a company from northern New South Wales, and I know in their case the company had to actually import the hemp from France. How ridiculous is it that it is easier in this country to import hemp from France than to source it locally. But it is not just individual home projects that are embracing the benefits of hempcrete. The Mildura Rural City Council in Victoria recently used hempcrete to build its Powerhouse Place, a community cultural hub. In her former role as Minister for Regional Development, our own Minister Shing was at the opening of that hub, and I am sure she can testify to its impressiveness.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

The PRESIDENT: Before I call the first question can I acknowledge a visiting delegation from the Parliament of Fiji from their public accounts and economic affairs committees. I understand they are going to be here to witness our Public Accounts and Estimates Committee in coming days, so there is pressure on Mr Galea, Mrs McArthur, Mr McGowan and Mr Puglielli to put on a professional yet entertaining performance for our welcome honourable members.

LGBTIQA+ community

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:01): (525) My question is for the Minister for Equality. Does the minister acknowledge that same-sex-attracted people, so lesbians and gay men, could feel that they have very little in common with the ‘TQ+’ part of the acronym that is used in our government documents?

The PRESIDENT: I have got a concern that it is asking for an opinion. I do not know, Mrs Deeming, if you want an opportunity to rephrase the question so it is not an opinion.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you, President, for the opportunity. Could the minister provide any research that corroborates the use of grouping the ‘LGB’ with the ‘TQ+’ in our advocacy and research papers and in our laws as a group that is cohesive – that they are advocating for the same things and the same rights?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:02): Thank you, Mrs Deeming, for that question. It is actually really significant timing that you are asking this question today, because this Friday is the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersex Discrimination and Transphobia, and key to the reason for this day is that it was not that long ago – it was 1990 – when the World Health Organization determined homosexuality not to be a disease. The genesis of LGBTIQA+ advocacy in civil rights has been based – and this is all but universally recognised – in the discrimination, isolation, harassment, disadvantage, violence and all too often loss of life experienced by LGBTIQA+ people because of who we are.

I say ‘who we are’ because I am proud and determined to be visible as a member of our LGBTIQA+ communities. I know that there are others in this place who are also determined to be visible. I am also determined to make it clear to people now and for the duration of my time in this Parliament that when we talk about equality not being negotiable and we talk about Australia’s first-ever equality portfolio being here in Victoria – work that was driven by Martin Foley as one of the most progressive allies and leaders in this space – it has been about making sure that equality is not negotiable for everybody across our LGBTIQA+ communities.

I also just want to make it really clear that when we are talking about the ‘G’ and when we are talking about the ‘L’ and when we are talking about the ‘T’ and we are talking about the ‘Q’, trans people also fit within all of these definitions. I know and I think you know, Mrs Deeming, people who are trans who identify as queer, who identify as gay, who identify as lesbians. If we are getting to the point in this discussion where we are saying that in our identities, in our gender, in our sexuality there is room only for a certain number of variations across the entire spectrum of human experience, then we are contributing to the very discrimination, isolation, exclusion, disadvantage and lesser life outcomes experienced that we know only too well. *(Time expired)*

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:05): Minister, all across the world there is actually a divide that is growing up. It is growing up in Australia and in the UK and multiple other countries – Canada, Sweden – where lesbians, gay men and bisexuals have tried to separate themselves in legislation, in being referred to as a cohort in the way that you have described, because they actually have differing objectives and their rights are conflicted with the ‘TQ’. For example, lesbians – I have raised this before by way of example. For same-sex-attracted females trying to have female-only

events for female same-sex-attracted people who are lesbians, in their minds you cannot be a male who is a lesbian. So the transgender identity that you are talking about, without disrespecting it, is something that they disagree with. *(Time expired)*

The PRESIDENT: That is more of a comment. The minister does not have to respond to a comment.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:06): I will respond, President, with your indulgence. Mrs Deeming, when I said ‘all but universally’ accepted, that is what I meant. LGBTIQ+ identity is stronger for the collective engagement in what it means to be other. I know only too well, having grown up feeling other my entire life, that it takes the support, the care, the visibility and the engagement of people around us to make sure that that disadvantage is understood, that it is ameliorated and that there is strength in a variety of different lived experiences. Please be under no doubt: here in Victoria equality is not negotiable; here in Victoria we will continue to stand up for the rights of trans and gender-diverse people; and within the equality portfolio I am determined – this government is determined – to make sure that trans and gender-diverse people are as central to that work as any other letter in the rainbow alphabet.

Integrity agencies funding

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:07): (526) My question is to the Attorney-General. Attorney, the Labor government has been the subject of multiple adverse findings from Victoria’s integrity agencies, including the IBAC in Operation Watts and the Ombudsman in her report on Labor’s red shirts rorts. In this year’s budget Labor is cutting the budgets of IBAC and the Ombudsman in real terms. Given Labor is pushing ahead with the \$216 billion Suburban Rail Loop, why won’t Labor adequately fund Victoria’s integrity agencies tasked with rooting out government corruption?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:08): President, I might just seek some guidance from you. The Attorney-General does not have responsibility for the budget position of IBAC and the Ombudsman. I have an administrative role in relation to talking to them about their operation, their legislation, but they are independent in terms of their budget, and therefore it is not within my remit. I do not sponsor their budget allocations. It is not my presentation to the Treasurer on their behalf. That is what they do. Having said that, I cannot give you a specific answer because you have asked the wrong minister. However, I can assure you that in my engagements with both the Ombudsman and the IBAC we ensure that they have the resources and the staff and the experience that they need to do the job that they are there to do. I cannot reflect on their specific budget allocation, as I have outlined, but I do have regular talks with them, and they have not raised concerns about their budget in the way you have characterised it.

The PRESIDENT: I will take that as an answer.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:09): Thank you, President.

Jaelyn Symes: I was trying to be helpful.

Georgie CROZIER: No, no. It is disappointing that, yes, you have got responsibility in some parts but not on the funding, and I will go to the point that –

Members interjecting.

Georgie CROZIER: Yes, yes. I get it.

Jaelyn Symes interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Attorney, the facts are in the budget, and what has happened – the cuts are there. I will just put my supplementary, if I could. The government’s budget forecast is for inflation to

be up to 2.75 per cent next year, yet budgets for the IBAC, the Victorian Ombudsman and the Victorian Inspectorate all fall well short of that. There is a question about why the government is cutting funding to the integrity agencies in real terms, so I ask: will you advocate on behalf of them to have that funding meet those inflationary forecasts?

The PRESIDENT: I struggle to put forward the supplementary given the answer from the minister that it is not in her remit as far as her responsibilities go within the cabinet. You can answer if you see fit, or you can do a point of order. My concern is once a minister says that it does not fall within their responsibility as the executive –

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

The PRESIDENT: I am happy to put the question; the minister can answer as she sees fit. As I said, my concern is once a minister says, ‘That doesn’t fall within my responsibility under the executive orders or the responsibility of the government,’ then a supplementary question in line with the same theme, or the same question, is hard to rule in.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, whilst IBAC is an independent agency, the minister has responsibility under the administrative orders for IBAC. The question here is: if the concept is that the minister says, ‘I’m not responsible. I won’t answer questions about these matters,’ to whom should questions therefore be directed?

The PRESIDENT: Mr Davis, on your point of order, it is not for me in my position to determine the responsibilities of each minister. If a minister’s answer is, ‘That is not my responsibility; the question you’ve asked me does not fall within my responsibilities under the executive orders or the responsibilities of the government,’ that is the answer. The only recourse that you have is to move to take note of the minister’s answer on the next day of meeting or to move another motion. That is the answer.

David Davis: Further to the point of order, President, the minister might answer, ‘I don’t have responsibility,’ when in fact under the administrative orders they are responsible to answer for that agency. It is just not satisfactory for a minister to say, ‘I don’t have responsibility,’ when in fact the administrative orders list them as having responsibility. They can say that the agency operates independently, but they can still answer questions about the matter.

The PRESIDENT: I think in this instance – and I hate paraphrasing members – the minister said that these are bodies that wish to have financial independence and be at arm’s length of a minister when it comes to their budgets. That was the answer.

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

The PRESIDENT: The minister is prepared to make more commentary, so I will call the minister.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:14): I kind of understand the position you are trying to put, but I am reluctant to step into the shoes of independent agencies who have budget autonomy. Although I have a relationship with the organisations, I think it is very important to keep that distinction, which is what I am trying to articulate in response to the question.

What I think concerns me about the way you articulated your question, Ms Crozier, is you are trying to categorise some kind of massive cut and impost on our integrity agencies, when historical funding, year-on-year increases and an actual increase in this year’s budget do not equate to the characterisation that you are trying to portray – that there is government interference and that we are trying to stomp on the operations of independent agencies. In fact our history, our record and our support of these agencies would point to the opposite.

Ministers statements: IDAHOBIT

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:14): There are 800 players in the AFL – 800. I would like to ask the chamber a question: how many of those 800 players are openly gay, transgender or intersex? How many LGBTIQ+ people do we have who are open about who they are in the AFL? The reason that I ask that question is because I cannot think of any. The reason that I cannot think of any is another really important reason as to why this Friday, the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersex Discrimination and Transphobia, remains so important. When we talk about the reasons for discrimination, for lesser life opportunities, for greater levels of mental distress, anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide, when we talk about denied opportunities and lack of access to programs, supports and services, it is very, very clear that we need to continue to support LGBTIQ+ people through days such as IDAHOBIT, which again recognises the World Health Organization’s decision, all too recently, to remove homosexuality from the diagnosis of diseases.

I want to acknowledge every single person and organisation who works so tirelessly to address disadvantage and discrimination. Sixty-eight per cent of LGBTIQ+ employees who responded to a survey in 2018 reported that they are not out at work. There are good reasons for this. Two out of three young people experienced abuse for their gender and sexuality in the last 12 months. Discrimination is all too common. IDAHOBIT is an important way to do something about it. I would urge everybody to get involved.

Middle East conflict

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:17): (527) My question is for the Leader of the Government, representing the Premier in the Legislative Council. Attorney, in 2021 your government made an agreement with Elbit industries to provide funding for their centre of excellence in Port Melbourne. Since these agreements were entered into, the Israeli state, aided by weapons developed and supplied by Elbit, have killed and injured over 100,000 Palestinians. Attorney, will your government cut ties with Elbit?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:17): I thank Dr Mansfield for her question, and I will pass it on to the Premier. Obviously there has been some consideration of related matters in the documents motion today, and I think it has been flagged for a petition. I would just urge the Greens political party to err on the side of caution before they start trying to build up conspiracies and fake facts that are not there. For the substantive response to that question, I will refer it to the Premier.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:18): I appreciate the Attorney passing on that question. I will say we are asking simple questions to clarify the facts about that – you either have a relationship or you do not. Will the government then commit to not entering into any future contracts with Elbit?

The PRESIDENT: I have got a concern that that is a hypothetical question. I will put the question.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:18): I will refer it to the Premier.

Foster carers

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:19): (528) My question is to the Minister for Children. Minister, why was there no funding in last week’s budget to increase the foster care allowance?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:19): Thank you very much for the question, Ms Crozier. It is great to see that we are back traversing this ground again, because I am more than happy to continue to talk about the wonderful

things that we are doing for our wonderful carers. Just yesterday I was having a conversation with Ms Bath about one of the wonderful carers in her community, who goes above and beyond to do the things that she does for the families in her community, and I have had similar conversations with many across the chamber. I want to take this opportunity to thank carers for the work that they do do. As we have said time and time again in this place, we acknowledge that our foster carers and our kinship carers provide loving and stable homes for many children who are certainly at risk of not having one in many other circumstances and who have often come from quite traumatic experiences. So we certainly want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the contribution that they do make.

We have a care allowance here in Victoria which contributes towards the day-to-day costs of caring for each and every child in care, and that allowance is dependent on both the age of the child and the needs of the child. As we have said before in this place, there are indeed higher level care allowances that are determined on a case-by-case basis through an assessment which considers the complexity and the needs of each and every child and whether or not specialist services are needed to support that child in that foster care placement. We also have additional allowances. We have the new placement allowance for level 1 placements for the first six months of a new placement, we have the education assistance payments per year until the child is 18 and we also have the client expenses funding, which is available to cover other extraordinary expenses. So we do in many ways, through allowances and varying degrees of allowances, support the placement of children in the care of foster carers.

I am very pleased that the 2024–25 state budget has provided \$38 million for improving outcomes for children and young people who are in home-based care. That funding includes the following elements: the continuation of the highly successful care support help desk, which we know carers have welcomed and have used significantly across the state; certainly the care hub in the Loddon area, which since November 2021 has provided earlier assessments, support and multidisciplinary care, importantly, to children and young people who are entering care for the first time; and the CaringLife app, which is another great service. As well as that, we are continuing the existing case contracting arrangements for 200 kinship care placements. That \$38 million that is in the 2024–25 budget absolutely goes to continuing those really significant and important services that support carers in the important work that they do. Can I again thank those carers for the contribution that they do make.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:22): Minister, thank you for that response. I know that you outlined some programs that have got increased funding, and I acknowledge the care support help desk that you also acknowledge. In 2022 a report conducted by KPMG recommended a 67 per cent increase to the care allowance, and I am just wondering: when you talk about all of those programs and the care desk, does that take into consideration that recommendation of increasing the care allowance by 67 per cent, as recommended by the KPMG report that was handed to your government?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:22): Thank you again, Ms Crozier, for your question and for that acknowledgement of those important services that are continued through the \$38 million. I thank Ms Crozier for the acknowledgement of those services, which are continually being supported – and indeed supported in the most recent budget – through that \$38 million.

As I have said many times before, the children in care are complex, their needs are complex and the ways in which we support their families are complex, and to simply break down the needs of foster carers only to an allowance is I think a short-sighted and simplistic way in which to consider the various supports that carers – foster carers, kinship carers and other carers – in our system need in order to support the children in their care. As I have said before, we have allowances. Those allowances are variable. They can be higher, depending on the needs of the child and the needs of the family, and there is always the opportunity for those to be further discussed in each and every instance with certainly DFFH to ensure that the right allowances are getting to the right families in care. *(Time expired)*

Ministers statements: budget 2024–25

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:24): I rise to update the house on the positive budget initiatives in my portfolios of corrections, youth justice and victim support. This budget is about helping families, and in my portfolios we are doing that by keeping our community safe.

In this year’s budget we have invested a further \$41.3 million into programs designed to help people in custody turn their lives around. This includes funding employment and training programs and transitional support for people leaving custody. And we are continuing our efforts to address the issue of Indigenous over-representation. We are investing \$28.2 million into Aboriginal-led specialist services and youth diversion services and culturally aware rehabilitation and reintegration programs for Aboriginal people in custody.

This budget also makes important investments in improving community safety through targeted programs in the youth justice system. We are investing \$34.8 million into programs that limit re-entry into the system, because we want young people living happy and healthy lives at home and at school, not getting into trouble. We are focused on holding offenders to account while at the same time supporting them to turn their lives around through funding vital early intervention and rehabilitative and support programs. We are investing in additional tools to hold a small cohort of serious and repeat offenders to account, with \$34.4 million to trial electronic monitoring and enhance bail supervision. This budget further delivers on our commitment to making transformative reforms to the victim support system so that it better supports victims, and we are investing \$71.9 million to support the commencement of the new financial assistance scheme later this year. This reform will be a major step forward in the support system available to victims of crime in Victoria, making it easier for them to get the assistance and support they need. I am proud that this budget is helping families, including through the investments in my corrections, youth justice and victim support portfolios.

Gender identity

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:26): (529) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Education. Responding appropriately to children and young people experiencing gender distress is a significant challenge. I have seen it cause chaos in families and indeed political parties, but it is a very significant challenge for schools. It is interesting when you make comments questioning the status quo who starts to come forward. I have had several parents contact me outlining their experiences where they believe a school has overstepped its remit. They generally relate to a child socially transitioning at school and the parents being completely blindsided. It is a pretty liberal interpretation of the education department’s guidelines. A parent that first contacted me a few weeks ago put it like this: last year was the first year that Santa did not visit, but this year supposedly their daughter is a mature minor and mature enough to make decisions without the involvement of parents. Minister, will you commit to reviewing and updating this guidance?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:27): I thank Mr Limbrick for his question. I will pass it to the Minister for Education.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:27): I thank the minister for passing that on. The substantive review of gender identity services for children and young people in the UK, otherwise known as the Cass review, had a whole chapter on social transitioning. Much of the contents of this chapter simply highlight that there is not a lot of high-quality research on the impact of socially transitioning for young people on either their mental health or the likelihood of progressing down a medical transition pathway. What the report does highlight is that parents or carers should be involved wherever possible. At the heart of some of the concerns is the interaction between things like the Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act 2021 and education department guidelines. A parent who appeared at the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the education system recently stated that parents who had explained to wellbeing staff that they wanted to take a cautious approach and access neutral psychotherapy were told that this was illegal in Victoria.

Minister, will you also ensure that schools are better educated that neutral psychotherapy and cautious approaches to gender transition are in fact not illegal?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:28): Thank you, Mr Limbrick. In accordance with the standing orders, I will refer your question to the Minister for Education.

Housing

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:28): (530) My question is to the Minister for Housing. Yesterday the *Age* reported on the state government's inability to clarify whether rules around rooming houses meet new national standards. As a result, hundreds of rooming house tenants across Melbourne are facing having basic amenities, such as sinks and hotplates, removed from their homes. Rooming house developer Frank Days has said he has been fighting this for the past 11 months. He has reached out to the current housing minister and the previous housing minister, he has reached out to the current Premier and previous Premier and he has never received a response. Minister, as we are in a housing crisis, why won't you talk to Mr Days and fix this problem?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:29): Mr Days has raised a number of concerns and questions about the way in which housing can be provided to people under the rooming house model. I am actually advised that a senior adviser from my office spoke directly with Mr Days about his concerns and provided him with a pathway for those concerns to be addressed. Again, it is actually really important that I put that on the record, because we do want to make sure that in responding to these concerns and to these questions we have got accurate information being incorporated into the questions that you ask. When the staff member from my office spoke with Mr Days, it was to refer him to Consumer Affairs Victoria and to discuss the way in which the rules around rooming houses apply and the standards which apply in the provision of accommodation to people under that particular model.

There are frameworks within which applications can be made for determination of particular facilities as rooming houses, and in that regard I also note that my office has discussed these very issues with a range of your colleagues, including your housing spokesperson in the other place Mr Riordan, and to that end I would suggest that perhaps you have a chat with him. But I also want to make it clear that we want to work alongside councils around the way in which rooming houses and planning decisions are taken. I would welcome an opportunity for you, Mr Mulholland, to address that question to the ministers for planning, consumer affairs or local government.

I just want to address any misconceptions that might apply across the chamber. When we talk to housing, it is across a number of different portfolios. When I was first appointed to this role, I did take the time to set out the numerous portfolios which have responsibility for this area. Housing, as we know, is a continuum. It ranges from private ownership and that side of the spectrum, which we have obviously supported through first home buyer funds and other matters that I discussed yesterday with Ms Payne, right through to homelessness and crisis support and accommodation. Rooming houses sit within that spectrum, and I would be really pleased to seek some answers for you from the relevant minister in accordance with the standing orders.

Again, just to be really clear: when it comes to homelessness supports, transitional housing, crisis accommodation and the interface there between social housing, which is the umbrella under which public and community housing applies, and options such as the ground lease model, I am very happy to take those questions but otherwise to refer them in accordance with the standing orders.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:32): That was a pretty astonishing answer. I understand that Mr Riordan said he has not spoken to or heard from the housing minister about this particular case, and also it is a social housing collective which Mr Days runs. There is inconsistency between the planning law and the Residential Tenancies Act, which means that people's kitchen sinks are being pulled out. The Victorian Planning Authority says that this is an easy fix, but it must be done

at a state level. To date your government says this is a local issue rather than at a state level. Mr Days says that no-one takes responsibility for making these decisions, and he is considering investing in other states. Minister, at the end of the day the buck stops with you. Why does your government continue to pass the buck when we are in a housing crisis?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:33): Mr Mulholland, I will take you through it again. The housing –

Members interjecting.

Harriet SHING: I will take up that interjection. My office has spoken with Mr Days, my office has spoken with Mr Riordan. I would suggest perhaps you clarify your position on that.

Again, social housing is delivered by community housing providers alongside the work that we do within Homes Victoria, alongside the work within the affordable cohort and alongside the public housing framework as well. When we also talk to private operators who are looking to provide rooming house opportunities, that is a matter which requires planning approval and requires council endorsement and those frameworks for decision-making that exist at that level of government.

Again, Mr Days was referred to Consumer Affairs Victoria. I am very, very happy to make sure that you understand what the process for that referral is and what the work is that Consumer Affairs Vic does. That is also where the taskforce comes in handy. Minister Williams in the other place I suspect will be able to provide you with further information should you wish it.

Ministers statements: multicultural communities

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:34): I rise to update the house on the investments the 2024–25 budget delivers to support our multicultural communities in Victoria. The Allan Labor government will always back our diverse communities because we know that our diversity is one of our greatest strengths. This year’s budget is investing over \$100 million in initiatives that directly support our multicultural communities.

Funding includes \$17.2 million into the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* to improve education and social outcomes for Victorians of African heritage, including the extremely successful homework clubs program, which keeps our young people engaged. We know the African communities committee undertakes critical work to ensure the community’s voice informs the delivery of policies and programs that impact Victoria’s African communities, and this year’s budget backs it in.

We are also investing over \$8 million in health, legal and social supports for our recently arrived migrants, including funding for 41 community hubs right across the state to assist migrant and refugee families, particularly mothers with young children, to connect with schools, each other and social services. There is over \$9 million to build on the success of community language schools, \$6 million to continue the successful security upgrades of faith-based school grant programs and \$4 million to deliver anti-vilification measures to support the work of the Anti-Racism Taskforce. We do not just talk about diversity, we celebrate it, and I am proud that our government is making the investments that support and deliver for Victoria’s multicultural communities.

Corrections system

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:36): (531) My question today is for the Minister for Corrections. Last week a very frustrated and concerned constituent reached out to me regarding the safety of prison officers. She told me of the daily assaults, threats and harm they are facing. So can the minister please explain what the government is doing to protect those who work in the prison system from harm?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:36): I thank the member for their question and their interest in our corrections system. Let us be very clear: every worker in our state deserves to feel safe in their workplace, especially our hardworking corrections officers. I know firsthand as I have had the privilege of meeting many of them how hardworking they are and how dedicated they are to not only keeping us all safe but also giving the people under their custody and care the best opportunity to turn their lives around. As a government we are very clear that any of this type of violence is unacceptable, and that is why we make sure that corrections officers have the same level of protection as emergency services workers. As a government we have invested in new facilities, in new technologies and in training for staff to best protect our staff. But these are inherently difficult environments, and I know as part of the government and as the minister I look forward to continuing to see further improvements. We work with WorkSafe and other agencies to ensure we have the safest possible workplaces and will continue to make those investments.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:37): I thank the minister for his answer. My constituent was most worried by the fact that it seems that OH&S requirements are failing to be adhered to, with prisoners being moved without precautions such as handcuffs, giving them the opportunity to assault officers. Can the minister explain why the corrections system is not adhering to the OH&S requirements and allowing staff to be in harm's way?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:38): I thank Mrs Tyrrell for the question. I would reject the premise of not adhering to those OH&S guidelines in terms of the use of handcuffs. There are a range of placement tools as well that are used to transport prisoners. It is a question that I ask the department and those operating our prisons – the use of handcuffs, as an example – and they obviously make a risk assessment based on each individual prisoner about the use of such tools. But let us be very clear: if someone does assault a staff member, it is my expectation that they are brought to justice, matters are quickly referred to police and people are charged, and that is what I understand occurs if staff are assaulted. Even one assault is one too many, and I think as a government we have shown through our investments in the facilities and in the increased training that we need a balance for all the stakeholders in the system but we need to make it as safe as possible for our staff, because every worker deserves to feel safe in their workplace.

Youth justice system

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:39): (532) My question is to the Minister for Youth Justice. Minister, young people are being released from youth justice centres without the correct paperwork being completed because of a lack of resources. Youth justice workers have had to travel from Cherry Creek to Eltham just to get the paperwork signed and to ensure a release is legal. Why is the government failing to provide, I therefore ask, proper resources onsite to ensure the legal requirements for release can be done?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:39): I thank Mr Davis for his question and his interest in our youth justice system. It is my understanding that at the moment at our two youth justice facilities we have a strong complement of workers, especially considering the record low numbers of young people in custody in our state at the moment. Mr Davis, if you have a specific allegation about an incident, I am happy to respond to that. In terms of our corrections system but in particular our youth justice system, you would be aware we have a new facility, Cherry Creek, a modern state-of-the-art facility in which we can support young people. We also have our existing Parkville precinct. Both of them have a strong complement of staff at the moment.

From my understanding our government is committed to creating jobs. Although there is a strong complement, we will continue to hire people, because we have programs that we run for young people to turn their lives around, whether it be addressing their mental health needs in our facilities or whether

it be in addressing other health needs, re-engaging with education or providing a pathway for employment through vocational training. We provide those at our custodial facilities, but my understanding is that we have a strong complement of staff at both the facilities at the moment.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:41): The minister strayed very wide there. It is not about job creation. This is about getting the legal details for release right, and I therefore ask: can you guarantee that all releases of young people without the correct paperwork have been rectified and have met all the legal requirements?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:41): I thank Mr Davis. As I said in my answer to your substantive question, Mr Davis, if you have got a specific example, that would assist. But what I will say is that we have a strong complement of staff at both our facilities. We have record low numbers of young people in custody, the lowest it has been since we entered into government.

Ministers statements: budget 2024–25

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:41): I would like to use my statement today as an opportunity to talk about this year’s budget. Of course this year’s budget is all about supporting families in Victoria, but from my perspective, making sure that we are continuing to invest in a safer Victoria is very, very important. We want to reduce reoffending, hold serious offenders to account and provide vital support to our hardworking emergency services.

We have delivered more than \$1 billion for our justice and emergency management response and recovery in this year’s budget. Our emergency services, as we know and we talk about here often – and I am very grateful for them – do a great job in keeping us safe during floods, fires and storms. We are making sure they have the equipment they need to do their job. There is \$34 million for 15 world-class replacement pumpers at the CFA and five aerial pumper platforms for the FRV.

To help more young people keep out of trouble and stay in schools and jobs it is really important to keep up our investment, and this year is no different, with \$34.8 million in programs to prevent young people from re-entering the justice system.

As I have reflected today, volunteers are at the heart of our emergency services, and VICSES will receive almost \$7 million for their crucial, crucial services.

To continue to support local communities devastated by recent natural disasters, there is more than half a billion dollars for relief and recovery efforts. We know that relief and recovery efforts take some time, and we are there, shoulder to shoulder, with those that are impacted.

We are also investing in and changing our bail supervision and support model. We have talked about our plans for electronic monitoring for a specific group of young offenders. We want the extra tools to ensure that bail conditions are followed and kids are supported and kept on track and that the community can be confident of their safety.

To continue addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system, an investment of \$28.2 million will back Aboriginal-led specialist family violence services and youth diversion services as well as dedicated in-prison programs and supports. It is all about ensuring that we are turning the dial on the over-representation of our First Nations peoples in the justice system.
(Time expired)

Bev McArthur: On a point of order, President, I would just like to congratulate you and your fellow leader in the other chamber for your enlightened approach in providing gas heating in the courtyard. This is a wonderful thing, and I know some in this place hate gas, but you have obviously got lots of common sense.

The PRESIDENT: It is lucky I am an even-minded President, because previous ones might have done their nut over that. But yes, who cares.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:45): Minister Blandthorn is going to get answers from the Minister for Education for both of Mr Limbrick's questions, and the same for Minister Symes, who will get Dr Mansfield answers to both her questions from the Premier. Minister Shing did offer, within the standing orders, to refer Mr Mulholland's questions, but given that the questions were directed to her originally, I would prefer she does that outside the standing orders. If she is happy to get them in a hurry, that would be good. I am sure Mr Mulholland would appreciate it.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, President, in light of further information, I would like the minister's answer to be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting. Also, in regard to the contact with Mr Riordan, it was referring him on to the Minister for Consumer Affairs, who has said that it is the responsibility of the Minister for Housing. So with that having come to light, I would like the minister's answer to be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

The PRESIDENT: It is a bit late, but if you want to move it, just put the motion in a simple form.

Evan Mulholland: I move:

That the minister's answer be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

David Limbrick: On a point of order, President, I have two questions that I have not received answers to in accordance with the standing orders, and I would like an explanation, please. They are question 426, asked on 21 February 2024, to the Minister for Government Services via the Attorney-General, in regard to births, deaths and marriages, and also question 470, asked on 20 March 2024, to the Attorney-General, regarding the review of the Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act 2021.

Jaelyn Symes: On the point of order, President, I signed off on them this morning, so they will arrive shortly.

The PRESIDENT: That is the way this chamber works.

Constituency questions

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:47): (856) My constituency question is for the Deputy Premier in his capacity as the Minister for Education. Since it was established by the Labor government in 2016, \$141.2 million has been invested in the school breakfast clubs program, with \$69.5 million provided in the 2023–24 budget. More than 40 million healthy meals have been given to students across the state. This year's budget provides funding for an additional 150 schools to be added to the program from the next financial year, with all schools invited to participate from July 2025. This program helps to ensure that every student can receive a nutritious and filling meal, because we know that kids learn best and can focus better when they have had a good breakfast. Indeed the same could be said to apply to all of us here. Minister, how will students in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region benefit from the \$21.1 million investment towards expanding the school breakfast clubs program in the 2024–25 Victorian budget?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:48): (857) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it concerns the actions of Yarra City Council in my electorate, who have decided to give every road a 30-kilometre speed limit and extend their trial, so all of Fitzroy and Collingwood are going to be slowed down. This ill-conceived trial extended into

perpetuity will wreak havoc on communities in my electorate but also the broader city. The comments made by the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police Shane Patton underscore the failures of this approach. His assertion that road fatalities are primarily occurring on rural roads, not inner-city streets, highlights the misguided nature of these trials. I ask the minister to provide an update on what her actions will be in regard to this and whether the minister can intervene. This is an ideological council that has had lots of monitors. It has increased its waste charge now by 30 per cent in a cost-of-living crisis. A trial applying to every single street in perpetuity is not a trial. It slows the rest of the state down, and the minister should intervene.

Northern Victoria Region

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:49): (858) My constituency question is for the Minister for Agriculture. There have been a concerning number of livestock truck rollovers in northern Victoria in recent months, including one in Kyneton and two in Bendigo, which, combined, killed hundreds of sheep. Harrowing scenes of streams of blood, organs and limbs of animals crushed and splattered across the ground were witnessed by pedestrians and motorists. There has been a lot of talk this week about live animal export by sea, but we do not often talk about the inherent cruelty and safety issues with transporting animals on trucks right here. Cover-ups by authorities involved in all too frequent incidents of livestock dying through transportation go unrecorded, unreported and without consequence. Will the government act with transparency and instigate reporting on the number of livestock deaths in northern Victorian transporting incidents and if there have been any charges laid at all on drivers?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:51): (859) What a delight to get the call for my constituency question this afternoon. I would love to say that I was absolutely delighted to see that last week's budget has one of the biggest investments in education in Victoria's history: \$1.9 billion was dedicated to the maintaining, upgrading and building of schools all around this state so we can reach our goal of building 100 new schools by 2026. Joey, as she is known to her mates – or Joanne, if we are being a little formal – lives not too far from Carlton North Primary School on Lee Street, and she has got her first bubba on the way. She loves the idea of a local school and has seen all the signage that has been about the school for a while about the repairs and maintenance work. She wants to know why it is so hard with the complexity of the repairs required for the school down the end of her street. So my question today is for the Minister for Education in another place: what are some of the additional complexities of our heritage schools that make the upgrades so much more challenging?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:52): (860) My question is for the Minister for Housing. A constituent of mine is one of hundreds of north-east Wonthaggi landowners who are affected by the retrospectively issued environmental audit overlay. She is in the final stages of building after years of delay. Weeks ago everything slowed down to a grind with the Minister for Planning's approval to amend C152 and the subsequent actions by the Victorian Planning Authority, including their sudden announcement regarding soil contamination in their area, which many landowners were not notified of. My constituent is now told that even if the build is complete and she finds somebody willing to move in, with the remaining allegedly contaminated soil an occupancy certificate is not guaranteed. How can the minister explain such a massive blunder, affecting nearly 1100 acres, that is costing landowners so much money, including the current owners, whose property values will be devalued as a result?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:53): (861) My constituency question today is to the Minister for Environment. In my electorate the Kew East Community Recycling group has outlined to me that it is next to impossible currently to recycle medicinal blister packs regularly. Blister

packs are technically recyclable, but there is almost no funding available to make it happen in practice. Individuals, community groups and small businesses have paid as much as \$277 to recycle just one set of 4000 packs, which is what you would find in a medium-sized box. It is also near impossible with current packaging practices to reduce blister pack use, as medicine is typically not a discretionary purchase, and most packs are currently ending up in landfill. State governments have primary responsibility for managing waste, and the Victorian government's recycling target is to divert 75 per cent of waste by 2025 – next year. The Recycling Victoria Advisory Committee met for the first time in October 2023. Minister, can you please advise if that committee has addressed the issue of blister pack recycling?

Eastern Victoria Region

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (12:54): (862) My question is for the Minister for Planning in the other place. I worked in construction for a decade, and when you walk into a building you can feel a quality build. That quality comes from trades that care for the work they do. In Victoria, when we build a home, a school, a hospital or a sports centre, Victorians want a building that will stand the test of time. In Eastern Victoria we are building incredible infrastructure, whether it is the Pakenham level crossing removal, the Latrobe Regional Hospital, the Korumburra community hub or the upgrades to the Rosebud Secondary College. Whilst the Liberals would have untrained workers doing 18-hour days with no safety equipment, the Labor Party knows a building built by trades with the right training, skills and qualifications is a finished product that meets everyone's expectations. We all benefit when new builds are built well. The 2024–25 Victorian budget includes a \$63 million investment for building reform. So, Minister, how is the government improving the oversight of the building industry?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (12:55): (863) My constituency question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the question I ask is: why were there no significant road funding announcements in this last state budget? I look at the roads in my electorate, particularly the highways – the Princes Highway, the Western Highway, the Pyrenees Highway, the Midland Highway and even the Henty Highway – but no, none of them get any significant work, because all this budget seems to be framed about is Melbourne, if there is anything in it at all. I want to quote the chair of Rural Councils Victoria, Mary-Anne Thomas – not Mary-Anne Thomas, Mary-Ann Brown. Mary-Ann Brown has actually got an idea. Mary-Ann Brown, who is in my electorate, said:

It is becoming increasingly apparent the current way we are funding roads, particularly in rural and regional areas, no longer works.

Now, that is from a peak body that represents rural areas. Why won't you guys listen and fund roads properly?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:56): (864) My question is for the Minister for Education. How is the government supporting increasing demand for public education in Southern Metropolitan Melbourne? Moorabbin is a growing suburb in Melbourne's south, with young families becoming increasingly attracted to all the area has to offer. Recently I joined my colleague the member for Bentleigh to visit Moorabbin Primary School to get an update on the progress of developments taking place at the school. There is a \$16 million redevelopment going on which will see 12 new classrooms, a new science room and improved facilities. The old classrooms are going to be replaced with a modern, brand new, competition-grade gymnasium, which will be open to the community outside school hours. The developments will mean there will be an extra 300 primary school places for local students who live in Hampton East, Highett and of course Moorabbin. Ensuring that every student has access to high-quality education where they live is a top priority of the Allan Labor government.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:57): (865) My constituency question is for the Minister for Health. My constituent is a First Nations woman living in Dandenong. She is often involved in the community programs run by the Dandenong and District Aborigines Co-operative. This co-op is one of the oldest Aboriginal-run health services in Australia, but its buildings are in a state of disrepair – leaking roofs, cracked walls and no disability access. Pleas for funding from state and federal agencies have fallen on deaf ears. The co-op has received no new capital funds in almost 35 years. So my constituent asks: what is the minister doing to ensure a way forward for this organisation to continue their important work?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:57): (866) My question is to the Treasurer in the other place. Last night the Prime Minister and his Treasurer had to allocate \$3.25 billion to the North East Link, bailing out yet another delinquent state project, but this bailout also reveals a total lack of confidence in the \$216 billion Suburban Rail Loop by the federal Labor Party. Last night confirmed the absence of federal support for the Suburban Rail Loop East in my electorate, despite the Victorian government's request for an additional \$10 billion. The SRL faces a substantial funding shortfall now, exceeding \$20 billion for just this first stage. Given these developments, can the Treasurer assure my constituents that the shortfall will not be met by any expansion of the already massive value capture component of the funding model – that is, that the shortfall will not be met by an expansion of the precinct in size, in height and in intended population beyond the 70,000 already proposed?

Northern Victoria Region

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:59): (867) My question today is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety in the other place, also noting that she is the Minister for Local Government. Katamatite is a beautiful little town in my region of Northern Victoria. They are a wonderful community, who have worked very hard together to attract tourists by having their old silos painted, adding Katamatite to the growing silo art trail. However, constituents residing in and working in Katamatite must deal with the nasty stench on a daily basis coming from the poor drainage system in the main arterial road, Beek Street. Greywater from the homes and businesses backs up and lies in the gutters. The smell is horrendous and is affecting businesses and homes. The Moira Shire Council has stated that this is not within their jurisdiction. My constituents want to know, after almost 20 years of dealing with this and the local council and state government constantly passing the buck: will the minister commit to fixing the drainage system in Katamatite?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaëlle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (13:00): (868) I would like to ask the Minister for Industrial Relations for support to resolve an issue with the portable long service leave benefit scheme. The Portable Long Service Authority manages the entitlements of over 300,000 registered workers. The scheme was established in 2019, but organisations like Bendigo Baptist Community Care in my electorate have six employees who commenced work before 2019. They have made regular payments each quarter since the scheme commenced and several staff are eligible for long service leave, yet the authority has advised that because the scheme was set up in 2019, none of the staff will reach entitlement until 2026, in seven years. The scheme does not factor in any employee that may be entitled to long service leave prior to 2026. This community organisation has been told that they need to pay out again any long service leave accrued after 2019 and wait until 2026 to be reimbursed. I am happy to provide further contact details to the minister to ensure these claims are reimbursed without delay.

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (13:01): (869) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it concerns the painting of speed limit reminders on roads, a practice

adopted in other jurisdictions in Australia and around the world. Personally I find lane directions painted on the road very helpful, and I believe the same is true for speed limit reminders. I appreciate that this marking alone would not constitute legal direction, nor should it be universally applied, but there are numerous towns in my electorate where residents suffer unsafe speeding, and this option would surely be a practical and affordable additional control. The department's speed zoning technical guidelines note that the usual practice is to avoid the use of speed limit pavement markings on arterial roads. Minister, will you reconsider this judgement and adopt the markings as successfully applied elsewhere in the world?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:01): (870) My question as to the Minister for Community Sport. Will the minister allocate any funds from the 2025 budget to upgrade changing rooms at the Goulburn Murray Cricket clubs? The operations manager of Goulburn Murray Cricket has contacted me to raise the urgent need to build some suitable changing rooms at cricket grounds throughout the region. Elite competitions receive substantial funding for renovations and upgrades but grassroots cricket, where every future champion starts, is severely underfunded. The problem is especially serious for women and junior players, where a lack of suitable changing rooms can be a real barrier to participation. Young women have been inspired by standout players like Ellyse Perry, and if we want more girls to take up cricket, then the government should invest in facilities that are modern, safe and comfortable. Page 89 of the budget paper sets out a target of 45 per cent of local sports infrastructure grants being allocated to recipients that are regionally based, so allocating funds for facilities servicing cricket clubs in the Goulburn–Murray region would assist the government to meet this target.

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (13:03): (871) My matter is for the Minister for Emergency Services. Supporting Victorians in crisis, volunteers and communities is paramount. On Tuesday 13 February a devastating storm ripped through Mirboo North and surrounding towns and environs. The storm was classified as level 3, which involves three tiers of governments as well as first responders, telcos, power and emergency agencies. Shockingly the Gippsland ICC – incident control centre – in Warragul was left unstaffed from midnight on the 13th, with all positions vacant. On 14 February, the day after the devastating natural disaster, six positions were left unstaffed, including deputy incident controller; public information officer, resources; and warning and situation analysis officer. Minister, in a crisis, why was the Gippsland incident control centre left unstaffed?

Sitting suspended 1:04 pm until 2:04 pm.

Bills

Hemp Industry Bill 2024

Second reading

Debate resumed.

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (14:04): I think when we stopped for questions I was just regaling the house with how delighted Minister Shing was at the hemp Powerhouse building in Mildura and about the extent of the current residential sector development using hempcrete. I just want to note that there are an estimated 300 residential dwellings in Australia that have used hempcrete. Barriers like the cost of specialised labour, the limited number of people practising hemp masonry and, as I discussed before, a lack of affordable and local raw materials make the growth of this sector extremely difficult. This is why even just having a conversation about the hemp industry is important. Education and encouragement can lead to more Victorians exploring how to use hemp and the job opportunities that come with it. We have seen in Victoria that more people being involved in hemp masonry has led to innovation in the prefabricated hemp brick space. This has substantially

reduced prices. In the case of one provider it has increased their job list from 10 builds over four years to four builds in just six months. In our conversations with relevant members of Parliament on this bill it was clear that we all had a shared desire to see the hemp industry in Victoria grow and to cut unnecessary red tape. This was doubly so in our discussions with the Victorian Farmers Federation. There is an appetite for deregulation but also a sense that we have been here and done this, so what will change over time?

Before I move on I would just like to pick up comments that were made previously by Ms Terpstra and also Ms Watt regarding the question of the fit-for-purpose nature of the current arrangements. It was suggested that the current regulatory framework is quite adequate, sitting as it does within the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981. If I can quote from Ms Emma Germano, the president of the Victorian Farmers Federation, she said yesterday:

We need government to get out of the way and give farmers the opportunity to harness the full potential of hemp cultivation and create new opportunities for our regional communities.

...

The laws regarding industrial hemp are not fit for purpose and create an ongoing stigma that links the crop with illicit drugs.

There is an appetite not just within the farmers federation but across the industry for deregulation in the hemp sector. I guess the question is: what will change this time if this legislation moves forward? Can you imagine if we just gave up every time we tried something once in this place? I suspect we would have a pretty lacklustre legislative agenda.

Bills are always more than words on a page. They are a message about what the government cares about, they start a conversation between industry and stakeholders and they shed light on what needs to change. When we are dealing with something like industrial hemp, this becomes incredibly important. The tentacles of regulatory burdens extend far and wide across jurisdictions and across production, processing, manufacturing and exporting. We can all agree that hemp is incredibly useful, so why do we continue to stifle this industry? Well, the answer is: a dash of stigma, a sprig of over-regulation, a touch of no standalone act and a drop of insufficient government support. And what have you got? You have got the current regulatory environment that industrial hemp suffers in Victoria.

This bill attempts to alleviate this suffering by reducing stigma by updating outdated terminology; increasing the maximum hemp licence term from three to five years; clarifying requirements, checks and appeal processes; enabling greater research and development; and removing inspection and licensing fees. We know that overseas the hemp economy is a multibillion-dollar industry and growing rapidly, and when we consider both the agricultural production and the downstream value-adding processing, that only expands our sense of just how dynamic this industry is, except for in Victoria.

There is also a bit of an evil circle that confronts the sector. On the one hand growers lament the draconian and antiquated regulatory framework and also the lack of processing facilities for downstream processing. On the other hand manufacturers and venture capitalists lament the lack of supply of raw materials as a confounder to investing in the all-important downstream value-adding processing. So in this chicken-and-egg situation, how do we break the cycle? There is no one simple solution that will magically actualise the potential of the hemp economy, but there is one very obvious point to start to break that evil circle: free up the constraints on supply and let the raw materials flow into the market. That is exactly what this bill seeks to do. Let the farmers do what farmers do best. Let them grow crops and let us stop making them operate in an environment that was primarily designed to regulate crops like opium poppies. We cannot solve this industry's woes in a single bill – we know that. There are complex layers of regulation and state and federal laws that interact here, but perhaps we can start conversations and we can look forward to seeing the government's response to the final report of the inquiry into the industrial hemp industry in Victoria.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many industry stakeholders who came in yesterday and participated in the show up in the Federation Room. I would also like to thank our many

colleagues, both in this chamber and in the other place, who came and checked out what was on show and learned a bit about the sector. Your participation is greatly appreciated. A bill like this is just the beginning, and we look forward to many more opportunities for discussion and collaboration with the government. Let us sow the seeds for Victoria's future and make the hemp industry all that it can be.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (14:11): I am pleased to speak on the Hemp Industry Bill 2024, and I thank Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank and the Legalise Cannabis Party for bringing this issue forward. I believe it was back in May 2023 that I last spoke on the hemp industry when we had a motion on creating an inquiry into industrial hemp. Back then I acknowledged the hemp industry was rapidly growing, both nationally and internationally. At that time I was a member of the committee that investigated the issues and opportunities that are currently within the Victorian hemp industry, and during the hearings we heard from stakeholders about the opportunities the hemp industry offers in Victoria.

The Allan Labor government sees the growing interest in the hemp industry in Victoria and what that may mean for opportunities within the industry and the agricultural industry particularly. This bill does pre-empt the response by the Allan government in terms of a response to the inquiry outcome. The government acknowledges the growing interest in the industrial hemp industry in Victoria, and this represents an exciting and growing opportunity for local businesses and jobs. The government will have more to say in this space in due course.

As Mr Ettershank mentioned, I visited the hemp industry showcase here at Parliament yesterday, and it was great to see how hemp can be used in the building, clothing, skincare and food industries. In the building industry alone, hemp has a number of desirable qualities. One of the stallholders was promoting its high thermal insulation – up to 80 per cent in energy savings; its fire, termite, mould and pest resistance; and breathable walls. Hemp provides design flexibility. It also has of course, as has already been discussed, a negative carbon footprint and provides a healthy living environment. I did ask about the glues that hold all the hemp pieces together, and they are essentially made from hemp oil, so it is my understanding that even the technology used in manufacturing products out of hemp is not toxic like some glues can be. Also, the buildings can be inherently airtight and have a high acoustic performance.

I noted also that the hemp clothing not only looks and feels very comfortable but looks good, especially the examples of work and school uniforms that were on display. In fact it was hard to tell the difference between hemp and linen – I am not sure if others found that when they were actually touching the materials. The potential for hemp in Victoria is clear to see.

If I can return to the practicalities of this bill, what is being discussed today is a standalone act for production and cultivation of hemp. But if a standalone act were to be considered for the hemp industry, it would not be likely to achieve any really great benefit over the current frameworks. I know this is a point of contention, and I acknowledge and accept that there is not universal agreement in this space, but Agriculture Victoria has indicated that the current framework is functioning well and that the provisions in the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 are in the most part consistent with other jurisdictions.

AgriFutures Australia identified industrial hemp as a potential high-growth industry, and the AgriFutures Australia emerging industries program is supporting the hemp industry in Australia with a \$2.5 million program focusing on research into improved hemp seeds and varieties, production methods and the development of hemp products. AgriFutures began conducting hemp trials in several locations, including in Hamilton in my electorate. Over the 2022–23 growing season trial a variety of hemp seeds were trialled, with grain yield ranging from 1.7 tonnes per hectare to 2.66 tonnes per hectare. They identified that a further planting season was required to strengthen the robustness of that data.

Significant work is already being undertaken to ensure that Victoria's expanding hemp industry has quality data, more varieties of seed and higher yield seeds for cultivation. Victoria's agricultural

industries are at the forefront of Australian production, and hemp may one day be one of those major contributors. Victoria contributed significantly to the economy through these industries. If we think of other fibre industries in Victoria and other agricultural industries in Victoria, there is our wool fibre industry. Agriculture Victoria in January 2023 stated that Victoria's wool production was worth \$717 million. Victoria is the second largest producer of wool, representing 28 per cent of Australia's tonnage. You would not imagine that, because you would think that it would be happening all through New South Wales, where it is a little bit of a warmer climate, but I think it is that fertility of our land and the high productivity and stocking rates that allow for such high production of wool.

Victoria's grain industry exported a total of 8.6 million tonnes of grain, worth approximately \$4.4 billion, and according to Global Victoria's food and fibre export performance report for 2022–23, Victoria represented 24 per cent of the total exports by value of agricultural industries. This is the highest in the nation. Victoria's agricultural industries are high-performing and fast-growing industries, so the hemp industry has the potential to play a significant role in Victoria's agricultural future. Hemp is a versatile plant with uses for all of its parts along with rapid growth. In addition to the uses I mentioned earlier, hemp can be used as kind of a copy of concrete – or 'hempcrete', as Mr Ettershank referred to – and also as a biofuel source in conjunction with its strong carbon sequestration capabilities and its soil regeneration properties. It sounds pretty awesome, actually. Perhaps we should all have hemp in our backyards – whoops! It certainly has a place in Victoria as a multi-use staple.

Currently there are only six industrial hemp growers in Victoria, cultivating around 200 hectares of hemp; however, with strong interest in the industry, it is clear that it has future growth potential. In 2022 the Victorian Labor government passed the Agriculture Legislation Amendment Act 2022 to support the cultivation of hemp and bolster industrial usage. This government acknowledges and supports with its current legislation the many uses of hemp balanced with crime prevention and safety oversight of cultivation. The current legislation, along with licensing, is required to prevent criminal activity in the cultivation and processing of low-THC cannabis. The industry as it is right now requires oversight by inspectors to ensure that hemp farmers are growing low-THC plants, with crop samples submitted for analysis required to not exceed 1 per cent THC.

There is no doubt that there are many uses for hemp, and the interest in the industry here in Victoria is growing. It is a space that is in its infancy whilst key groups gather data, research crop yields and develop economical seed varieties. I thank Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank and the Legalise Cannabis Party for their work in this space. This is an exciting growth industry, and the Allan government will have more to say in the future.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:21): I rise to speak on the Hemp Industry Bill 2024. Last year I was delighted to be part of the inquiry into the industrial hemp industry in Victoria, as part of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. I have said this to Ms Payne before, but coming into the inquiry I was closed off to the idea. I definitely had a preconceived idea in my mind, and I really thought it was a concept that I would not support at all –

Members interjecting.

Renee HEATH: I am not sure what the laughing is over there, but I will take it as a compliment. But regardless, as the witnesses came through and I began to speak to and hear from different people, I thought, 'Wow, this really is an industry that I think is underestimated and has a lot of potential in it.' We got to learn about the barriers, the issues and the opportunities in Victoria. We got to look at what we are doing in Victoria as opposed to other jurisdictions in the country and some opportunities that we are currently missing out on. I was very impressed by the agricultural opportunities and the environmental benefits that could be had from this crop.

One of the important things to note is what hemp is exactly, because even that alone can have some misconceptions around it. So what is hemp? It is a variety of cannabis with low levels of THC, and

that means that it does not have the psychoactive effects associated with the prohibited cannabis varieties. It is legally defined as low-THC cannabis when the THC levels are lower than 1 per cent.

There is probably a lot we can talk about in this, so what I thought I would do is talk about some areas I am not comfortable with or what I would perceive to be risks and then I would talk about areas that I am absolutely comfortable with and what I would perceive to be opportunities. I am sure that Mr Ettershank and Ms Payne will be happy to know I have got two areas that I think could be a possible risk and five that could be potential opportunities.

I will just start first of all with what could be perceived as risks. Some of the submissions that we got in said that potentially there could be some risks and concerns to stock feed, especially the effects that it can have on paediatric neurological development. A risk assessment done for Health Canada – I was going to say ‘Health Cannabis’ – states:

New food products and cosmetic products made from hemp ... pose an unacceptable risk to the health of consumers.

It also says that hemp products may not be safe, because even small amounts of THC may cause developmental problems. Those most at risk, the study says, are children exposed in the womb or through breast milk or teenagers whose reproductive systems are developing. It says:

Hazards associated with exposure to THC include acute neurological effects and long-term effects on brain development, the reproductive system and the immune system ...

I just want to acknowledge that and say that that is something that has been documented. If that risk is there, which we will find out, absolutely – and there is some data – I think our response should be to just make sure that people have choice and that they know that things are labelled well. If there are different cosmetics, for instance, or foods that contain hemp, I think it is a good idea that they state that.

The second area that could be perceived as a risk and that the committee heard there are some risks associated with is stockfeed, like I said. Emma Germano, the president of the Victorian Farmers Federation said – and I thought this was actually quite good – that hemp is not the best placed feed for animals. However, it could be a very good backup – if something were to happen and there was a shortage, it could provide quite a good backup. Some studies that we heard about in the committee and in the public hearings suggested that the THC would go through into the flesh of the animal and it could have some effects on human consumption. Those are the two areas from the committee that I thought could be and that really stuck out to me as potential risks.

Now I want to talk about the areas that I believe really create an incredible opportunity. The first one is textile use, and Ms Ermacora spoke about it a little bit before. The committee heard a lot about different businesses, and one is the business of a lady who works for Ms Purcell who has an incredible business in sustainable fashion that uses hemp to create beautiful fashion products. It can offer a really lovely substitute to other fabrics. I think her name is Emma, and she is the founder of what is called Collective Fashion Justice. She told the committee that hemp can be utilised as a direct replacement for cotton, wool and fossil fuel based fabrics. I thought, ‘Well, that’s absolutely fantastic,’ and when I began to look into it, there are a lot of people that are choosing more sustainable fabrics to use to make clothes with.

It actually reminded me of what I think is a bit of a funny story. I was talking to a couple recently. I do not know if this is a good thing or a bad thing, but one of the witnesses had bragged that there are such good microbial agents that he only has to wash his clothes every three weeks, and I thought, ‘That is fantastic.’ It reminded me of a story. There was a married couple I was talking to, and I was actually telling them about that. She was doing a course at Marriage Gym, which is about creating a healthy, strong marriage. They talked about different little tricks that you could do, and one of them is hiding little notes in a lunch box and in different places. Her husband went camping, and he had hemp socks. She had put a little note in his hemp socks and he never thanked her, and she was so offended by him. She finally, after about three days of him being back, confronted him. She said, ‘Why didn’t you thank

me for the note?’ He said, ‘I didn’t see the note. Where did you leave it?’ She said, ‘In your socks.’ And he said, ‘I didn’t change my socks.’ But the antimicrobial and anti-whatever agents are so good that it is a fantastic option for textiles and for different clothes.

The next one I am going to talk about I was most impressed with, and that is its use in building and construction. A witness brought in some amazing hempcrete bricks. This is not something new. In fact in history a lot of fantastic, beautiful buildings were actually built with hemp. Mr Ettershank spoke about how to make it, and he would have described it a lot better than me. But it is a fantastic replacement. It is a lot more energy efficient in that you will not have to keep using your aircon as much and your heating as much. If Labor stay in and we continue with this cost-of-living crisis, you will all wish you had hemp houses so they could be more efficient. They also serve to store captured carbon; they provide amazing thermal and noise insulation; they are fire resistant, which I think is fantastic; and they are mould resistant. They look beautiful. I saw a photo of a lady who had her whole house made out of hemp. It is extremely versatile, and you can construct a house a lot faster using hemp than traditional, more common materials that we use now. They are a lot lighter, so they are easier on the builders and better to use.

The third area that I thought has real potential is with the transition away from plastics in packaging and their use to store food. There was another witness that came in with a whole range of different cups, little takeaway containers, that were completely biodegradable, and I thought they were fantastic. That is a really good substitute for the different synthetic, petroleum-based plastics that we have right now, which we are really transitioning away from. They were really good. Like I said before with the clothing, hemp has very good antibacterial properties, so they are a lot safer and a lot better and your food could potentially last longer in it. So that is a really great thing that could be used.

The fourth reason, and I hope I have got my numbers right, is the carbon sequestration. It is very good for the environment. We heard a lot of evidence about how, because of the quick turnover and how fast you can grow hemp, it is really just good for the environment in general.

The last area that I want to talk about, and this is one that is interesting for me, is that one of the recommendations was that hemp could potentially act as a replacement for the native timber industry. I kept this one until last because this is one that has been an absolute bee in my bonnet. I think that most people, if they listen to any of my speeches, would be aware that Labor ripped the guts out of my region when they closed the native timber industry. I know some people will not agree with my view on this, but this is something I am extremely strong on. The native timber industry for generations provided strong, stable employment for people in my region. A few facts about it: 94 per cent of our native forests were locked up in parks, water catchments and forests. That means that 6 per cent of the native forests were able to be harvested. Of that, only 0.03 per cent were able to be harvested each year, and those trees that were harvested straightaway got replanted. With that, when those trees regrew they stored more carbon. This is something that was very sustainable. In fact the UN says that you need to have a native timber industry if you want to have a healthy and clean environment.

Regardless of the facts, Labor shut this industry down anyway, and it really has hurt my community. In fact it is estimated that in Orbost in my community 40 per cent of people were employed by the native timber industry. I personally spoke to some who had been in that industry and their families had for four generations, and the whole idea that what we were doing was going in and just ripping out forests is not true. The area that they were harvesting and the area that they were using were areas that had been replanted after the 1939 fires. The whole narrative I believe was misleading, and it is something that has been shut down five years early and has left my community absolutely shattered. This last one that said hemp, for the native timber industry, maybe can be a replacement. Look, you can make a lot of things out of hemp. It is an incredible plant. You can use absolutely every part of it. Nothing goes to waste. But it will not replace an industry that has supported thousands and thousands of people in my community, that has provided stable and reliable employment for thousands and thousands of people in my community. Now that it has been ripped out, the guts have been ripped out of those communities, so I just wanted to say that.

But I commend the bill to the house. I want to thank Mr Ettershank and Ms Payne for doing quite an amazing amount of work and also respectfully trying to convince us that there are maybe some good things about the cannabis plant. I will put on record that they are not all good things with the cannabis plant. But thank you very much, and we will see what happens next.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:35): I move:

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

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until later this day.

Residential Tenancies Amendment (Rent Freeze and Caps) Bill 2023

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Aiv Puglielli:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (14:36): I am pleased to continue my contribution some months after we began debate on this important bill and to add to what I have remarked on previously. The reason we must talk about how we can better support renters is because the housing crisis in Victoria and indeed right across Australia just continues to worsen, and parliaments like these and governments like the one in Victoria are just not doing enough to support the thousands, if not millions, of people who are struggling to keep a roof over their heads.

Since we began debate on this bill some months ago, rents have continued to skyrocket. In the past year there has been an average rental increase of almost 14 per cent across Victoria, and that is on top of the increase of over 11 per cent from the year before that. The areas that have been hit the hardest are those with a higher proportion of low-income earners, which means the most vulnerable are hurting the most. For renters there is no end or relief in sight. The rental vacancy rate remains at around 1 per cent in Victoria, and as our housing stock grows at a snail's pace, driving up rent prices even further, more and more people are being priced out of even the private rental market. Lease renewals bring huge anxiety for renters. For many it is not a question of if there will be a rent increase but of how much. Will it be so much that they have to cut back on other essentials, or will it be so much that they have to move to another place altogether? Moving comes with its own sets of challenges. A tight rental market means few options to choose from and severe competition with everyone else who is looking, not to mention the hundreds – sometimes thousands – of dollars it costs to move house.

Renters are struggling in ways we have not seen in our lifetime. We are hearing about people skipping meals so that they can keep a roof over their heads, about food banks being attended by people who have never sought this kind of help before and about families with small children being expelled from their homes by colossal rent increases and having to live in tents or in cars. The public housing waitlist is already at over 120,000 people and growing, and these people have no hope of finding somewhere to stay as we move into a cold winter. Under these conditions it is unconscionable to leave the rental market to regulate itself. The rent freeze should have happened a long time ago, before things started to deteriorate and hurt so many people. Research by Better Renting tells us that if a rent freeze had been implemented in March of last year, a household in Melbourne would have saved well over \$2537 by now. If this policy was implemented across the country, the savings to renters would be \$5.3 billion over the next year. These figures are the difference between food on the table and going hungry for some families. For others it is the difference between a roof over their heads and sleeping rough.

We are urging the government to freeze rents without delay. This is a measure that will provide relief for renters – not at some distant point in the future, but right now when it is needed most. Rent controls are not a new idea; they have been adopted by many governments across the world, including Scotland, Germany, Denmark and China. Even the ACT right here in Australia has rent caps that are linked to inflation. Contrary to the current economic orthodoxy on rent controls, these jurisdictions have not had a sudden drop in rental property supply, nor have their property markets collapsed. The

research which espouses these fearmongering views about rent controls is brought to you by the property lobby, the development industry and conservative media. The government needs to stop ignoring the evidence that is before us and ignoring the struggle of renters. We cannot keep treating property as primarily a financial asset and housing as an afterthought. Labor's current housing policy fails to recognise the urgent need to shift the balance of power between landlords, real estate agents and tenants. This is why we have proposed this bill and we have also been fighting for other reforms like a 90-day cap on short-stay accommodation such as Airbnb so that more homes can be made available to those in need at prices they can afford.

We are putting forward real solutions to this rental crisis. We are putting these ideas on the table. Ignoring the crisis or tinkering around the edges will not make it go away. The government has several tools at its disposal to make things better for renters right now and protect those most at risk of homelessness. Labor cannot wait any longer. We need a rent freeze now.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (14:41): I rise to speak on the bill before us, the Residential Tenancies Amendment (Rent Freeze and Caps) Bill 2023, brought to us by Mr Puglielli, a member for North-Eastern Metropolitan. I am keen to get up here and make a contribution on this. Mr Puglielli in his second-reading speech, which I think I was here for some of and some of which I watched in the office, I recall, made assurances that the proposal around rent freezes and caps is not a Greens thought bubble. Look, I have got to say as someone who has lived much of my life renting, I get it – frankly I just get it. Ask any group of people my age or younger, and they will fill your ears with horror stories about the lines at housing inspections, the torturous application forms, the seemingly unjustifiable rent hikes, the black mould. I understand it, and I have seen it all. I understand the struggle to meet rent, the fights with managing agents to secure the most minor of repairs, the fights over the bond – oh, gosh, I could tell you some stories about that. The list just goes on. Even worse, I have got to say and renters would say, it is understanding your rights and securing clear and timely relief from authorities such as Consumer Affairs Victoria and VCAT. I get it.

But a bill to freeze rent and clumsily put caps on rent increases is not the answer. I would say and agree with that member for North-Eastern Metro that it is not even a thought bubble. In fact I was thinking about academics and researchers and what they are saying. Yes, I am very familiar with the work of Better Renting, but I went to associate professor at Deakin Business School Ameeta Jain. She had a piece recently in the *Conversation*, in June, where she talked about rental caps. She said:

While freezing rents would appear to be a simple method to increase rental housing affordability, the unintended consequences of any such move will have a long-term negative impact on the total availability of rental housing stock, reducing the quality of housing and increasing a black market in rental housing.

Global experience suggests that improving supply, by easing building restrictions and scrapping red tape for new developments, is likely to be a more effective policy tool in Australia. Local councils and state governments need to simplify and expedite the process for approving new developments at the same time as reducing taxes on rental properties, both during construction and later.

It is clear that Victoria deserves a much more comprehensive approach to rental affordability, renters rights and security for all Victorians, and to that end, instead of proposing a rent-and-cap scheme that has been proved time and time again not to work, the Allan government is focused on increasing housing supply and strengthening our tenant protections. We believe that everyone deserves access to a safe, secure and affordable home, whether they own it or not.

Victoria already boasts the strongest rental protections in the country, yet this government acknowledges that there is more to be done to ensure fair treatment for renters today. I am going to go over the 130 reforms – not all of the 130, but the ones that I hear time and time again are so strongly supported by tenants in our state. Of course they were added to by the housing statement that came through in, I believe, September last year. We are advancing protections for renters by restricting rent increases between successive fixed-term rental agreements, banning rental bidding and safeguarding renters' personal information. I have got to tell you, the amount of information that some of these real estate agents want about you is obscene, so I am very happy to see that safeguarding of renters'

personal information; I can only imagine what happens if that all gets out. We are extending notice periods for rent increases and vacating to 90 days. There is enforced mandatory training and licensing for industry professionals, like agents and property managers, alongside the introduction of stricter penalties for law-breaking agents and sellers. Let me tell you, members of our LGBTI community are not happy about having to hide who they are just to get a rental, so I think some stricter penalties out there for law-breaking agents and sellers is a really good thing. I was most pleased to hear about Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria and that that is being established. But the one that filled me up, I have got to say, is the portable rental bond scheme. That I know will be enormously popular. I have already heard a few folks talk about that with great enthusiasm.

We have delivered on our commitment to a rental stress support package, increasing our initial \$2 million commitment to \$7.8 million. The package addresses the rising demand for rental assistance across Victoria, complementing our efforts to boost social, affordable and market housing supply. Of course we have got the \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build, which is aimed at constructing 800,000 new homes statewide over the next decade, and we firmly believe that the increased supply of homes will drive affordability. It is only a Labor government that would display the courage to build, build and build the homes Victorians will need over the coming decades, and only Labor governments can be relied upon to refine and deliver the protection that tenants want and need.

I have been in this space for a little while now, and I have got to say that this bill before us will do more harm than good. The government will be opposing it, which will be no surprise, I assume, to those behind me. Our government has championed renters' rights through the introduction of these 130 reforms, allowing more flexibility for renters to modify their homes, eliminating no-cause evictions and removing barriers to pet ownership. We have also introduced minimum standards to ensure safer, more energy-efficient rental properties, and Consumer Affairs Victoria actively investigates landlords who breach these standards, with stringent penalties for egregious or systemic violations. I think it is important to note that there are some bad players out there, and they are being investigated by Consumer Affairs Victoria. We have bolstered the enforcement, and it is required. We have established a new renting taskforce within CAV tasked with cracking down on misconduct by rental providers and agents, including offences like false advertising and failure to maintain minimum housing standards.

The Allan Labor government is prioritising fair and secure housing for all Victorians, and to achieve that we understand that we need to implement some ongoing training and some licensing requirements for real estate industry professionals to foster some ethical practices and ensure renters' peace of mind. Under the housing statement we are also imposing tougher penalties for misconduct, including the removal of commissions for underquoting – how good is that? We believe promoting better skills and conduct within the real estate industry will benefit renters and property owners alike.

Rental controls have been spoken about in this bill before us, and I have got to say the Allan Labor government's housing statement does not propose rent controls. It recognises the adverse long-term effects observed in other cities worldwide. Evidence from places like San Francisco and Stockholm suggest that rental controls reduce housing supply and exacerbate rent inflation, disproportionately affecting vulnerable renters – and that is before I get into the black market rentals that are over there. By way of contrast, can I just say when rental controls in towns such as the Boston metropolitan area were repealed, studies from there showed that the outcome was an increase in rental supply and housing maintenance, importantly. Given Melbourne's historically low rental vacancy rates and high demand, there is no doubting implementing rent caps without a national framework risks deterring investment in rental housing. Our focus remains on increasing housing supply to alleviate these pressures on renters.

Of course I am also thinking about our regional friends, and the fact is that in regional Victoria, with the housing supply issue, it is pretty tough out there. That is why the announcement of \$1 billion in the Regional Housing Fund, delivering 1300 social and affordable housing homes across regional Victoria, is so welcomed. It includes some fast-tracking of projects in flood-affected areas and

provides immediate support for people experiencing homelessness. There are of course our collaboration efforts with the federal government, and I was happy to see the federal budget handed down last night, which included some more money for housing. What we are seeing there through collaboration with the Commonwealth is that we are set to deliver 769 homes over five years under the social housing accelerator program, which aims to expand social housing and provide really modern and energy-efficient homes for vulnerable Victorians. I know there in Carlton that the red-brick towers are going to get replaced by something that I am sure is going to be much loved by the community.

The Allan government has a commitment to breaking the cycle of homelessness, because let us also remember that a whole bunch of folks are homeless in Victoria on any given night. I know that we must do more for those communities. We must invest in homelessness prevention support services and specialised housing programs. That is why this year's budget delivered \$196.9 million over five years to break the cycle of homelessness in partnership with the homelessness sector, so I thank them for all their efforts in supporting our community. There is as part of that \$196.9 million the establishment of a four-year competitive grants program for homelessness services, funding for Journey to Social Inclusion over four years to address rough sleeping in our community and some very welcomed and dedicated funding to addressing homelessness for First Peoples through self-determining approaches with Aboriginal Housing Victoria in the *Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*. I also know that the homelessness after-hours statewide service will get some funding to help provide access to homelessness services and crisis responses outside of business hours. There is also some targeted support to address young people and women experiencing homelessness. There is Better Health and Housing to support those folks with some really complex housing needs. I have the good fortune of supporting a number of those folks through my electorate office work, particularly those that access our world-class medical services through the inner north and the Parkville precinct.

One thing that I know is particularly needed is the continuation of Pride in Place, a specialised support for LGBTIQ+ Victorians experiencing or at risk of homelessness. There are youth activities, engagements and safe spaces through the Richmond youth hub right there as well in Northern Metro. So this is a pretty significant investment in addition to the existing \$300 million to specialist homelessness services, which benefits 100,000 vulnerable Victorians who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

There are some things that I want to go over with respect to some of the action or inaction by the local councils in my area when it comes to blocking housing. I know that the City of Darebin in 2017 spearheaded the vote against the construction of new social housing units in Preston, and the Preston renewal project was pretty strongly opposed by some folks at the City of Darebin. Closer to home in my part of the world, the Greens of Merri-bek voted against the redevelopment of the former Gromn Place. I know that the member for Pascoe Vale has visited that development a number of times. It is a fantastic investment, and I am really happy to see that when –

Samantha Ratnam: On a point of order, Acting President, I seek your guidance on the accuracy of the member's contribution. The member has made an assertion which is factually incorrect, and I ask her to withdraw that comment.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): There is no point of order. Ms Watt to continue.

Sheena WATT: I am happy to continue, and I can talk a little bit about Yarra City Council and a rejection there by the Greens party when it came to the social and affordable housing project in Collingwood that would have introduced hundreds of additional homes to the local housing market. I know that the community there were very much calling for it. The benefit for renters and prospective homebuyers in that area certainly is not lost on those of us from that part of the world. There is more to be said and there are more contributions happening, and I cannot say strongly enough that this bill will not address the critical issues affecting our housing and rental markets here in Victoria and indeed

in my part of the world in the inner north. That is why I and the government will not be supporting this bill before us today.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:55): I am pleased to rise to speak on the Residential Tenancies Amendment (Rent Freeze and Caps) Bill 2023. At the risk of starting with a cliché, Churchill said that if you are not a socialist at 21 you have no heart and if you are not a conservative by 30 you have no brain. I think that is a fairly accurate way to describe this bill, because its heart is absolutely in the right place. I have absolutely no doubt about the pain our community is feeling at the acute shortage of rental properties, and I fully endorse the desire to do something about it. We in this place are privileged to have a place of leadership in this society, and we are obligated to do something about it when we see suffering, when we see unfairness, when we see the social contract not being fulfilled the way it should be. Most of my life I was a renter as well. I am glad I own a home now, but I was a renter for a very long time of all sorts of different qualities of rental, some of them pretty gross. In my bohemian days I revelled in that – the mattress on the floor and a glass of red wine by the bed.

But there is always a balance between the renters' rights and the rental providers' rights. It is a very delicate balance that needs to be maintained, because human nature being what it is, inevitably, if the power balance skews any which way, people take advantage of it, and we know that. We know that rental providers take advantage of their tenants terribly, in some cases in appalling ways, but we also know that tenants do the same, which is just to say human nature will prevail. Our job as lawmakers and regulation and rule setters is to make sure that that balance is fair and equitable to all, and I think that is why probably this bill is right in heart but wrong in practice. Usually in your youth, when you start as a socialist, you start as a good Russian socialist, then you move to the Yugoslavian mixed-market model and then you eventually realise it is all garbage.

Members interjecting.

Richard WELCH: Sorry, what was the interjection? I will take the interjection.

Members interjecting.

Richard WELCH: I do not know what that means. The balance must be right. The problem in this of course is it does not address the problem at heart, because there are simply practical issues with the bill in the capping of rents at 2 per cent. I know there are other provisions, but let us just take the simplest example, capping rent at 2 per cent. Of course the fundamental flaw of that is it assumes all other costs also remain within that 2 per cent, so any other costs of being a rental provider above 2 per cent mean you are actually paying to provide the rental stock.

Obviously we have had numerous examples around the world where a rental cap simply destroys supply. It means either those who are already providing rental assets exit the market, as we are seeing in Melbourne quite overtly right now, or it deters new entrants from coming in and adding new rental stock. Again, we have the lowest levels of new stock being added. It also destroys the incentive of the rental provider to maintain the property, because they are dealing within narrowed margins. They have to then be very judicious in how they maintain those properties, because again they will fall into loss. Of course it destroys the incentive for capital improvement, because if you put your capital into this asset class you are going to get a lower return than putting your capital into another asset class. What that means is people will shift that capital to less productive purposes for the benefit of society and they will move it to productive purposes that are of benefit for themselves. So they will go into other asset classes, and that is writ large with what we are seeing in Melbourne right now. I wish it was otherwise.

I think the other fundamental flaw that we have got in this is the bureaucracy itself to administer it. The proposition to administer it is truly Russian-esque, in that the scale of administration you would need to vet and review every single new lease agreement so that it met and complied with these provisions would put an incredible amount of cost into the system. That cost has got to be passed on

somewhere. It would put in an incredible amount of delay, which would exacerbate the time, effort and cost for the rental provider and for the person trying to rent. In that sense it fails in a practical sense as well. When you consider that additional impost in addition to all the other controls and restrictions and taxes that go in conjunction with being a rental provider, it makes, I think, the proposition quite untenable for people wanting to go into that market, wanting to be rental providers. You would have to wonder what the cost of that administration would be and what the extent of delays would be. That can have all sorts of flow-on effects that radiate out from that as well, in a practical sense.

The other question of course is: why do we stop at rent? There are other essentials of life that we should also consider capping the prices of. Should we have not capped energy prices two years ago? We put a hard cap on that as well – and so on and so on. We could cap all the prices in the supermarket – and we are back at being 17 doing HSC and thinking Yugoslavia is a good idea.

It does not fail at heart; I think the desire to address this is right. On the solution, I have different antidotes to the problem. For me the biggest antidote of course is to acknowledge the areas that are priming demand in the first place. We have a high level of immigration. We have a high level of foreign students, who are all welcome, but they do prime it. We have a constricted supply, because we are, again, too interfering in a lot of planning policies. We are not letting people get on with building. We could be building in the regions. We could be making good use of mixed usage and higher densities in a number of suburbs without destroying the amenity of those suburbs. We could be reducing the burden on investment into residential property so that more capital moves that way.

To me a rental cap is a sugar hit. Basic structural economics, as demonstrated time and time again, will provide the supply we need to meet the demand. When that supply comes back into balance and there are more properties for rent than there are renters, then the balance of power between renter and rental provider will come back to a more sane position. In the meantime we have a mess. I agree it is a mess. I agree we need to change it. I agree we need to do something about it. I just do not agree that this is the way to do it. I will conclude my contribution there.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:04): I rise to make a contribution on the Residential Tenancies Amendment (Rent Freeze and Caps) Bill 2023 on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria. This bill provides for a freeze of rents at the rate they were on 1 January this year or, if not previously leased, at no more than 10 per cent above the local median rate for a two-year period. With respect to rent caps, this bill caps rent increases at 2 per cent every two years and links rent to the property instead of the tenancy. Importantly, this bill also ends no-grounds evictions at the end of a fixed-term lease and provides powers for tenants wishing to challenge a rate increase.

It is no secret that we are in the middle of a housing crisis. This government's own housing statement notes that, disturbingly:

... in the last five years, typical rents have gone up by 21 per cent in Melbourne and 40 per cent in regional Victoria.

We also know that there are more renters now than ever before in Australian history. People are being forced to stay in the rental market for longer, with the time it takes a Victorian household to save a deposit almost doubling in the last two decades to 6.2 years. Many face an impossible choice, sacrificing more, often essentials, to keep a roof over their heads. Eventually many become homeless. I know in my region many local government areas have experienced a rapid and sustained increase in homelessness. In Monash we saw that between 2016 and 2021 there was a 101.4 per cent increase in the homelessness rate. In more recent years, data from the Council to Homeless Persons shows that Casey recorded the highest demand for services for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and 40 per cent of people considered to be homeless are under 24 years of age. These stats are damning.

As a member of the Legal and Social Issues Committee, the topic of rental affordability is one that I am acutely aware of. The final report for the inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria acknowledged that numerous organisations and renters supported some type of rental control.

The report also highlighted a few concerns about rent controls that I would like to address – namely that there would be a reduced rental supply because it would disincentivise new construction and rental providers would sell rental stock. The elephant in the room of course is that if people sell their investment properties, who buys them? According to the evidence in the report, owner-occupiers. So rental controls lead to increased housing supply for owner-occupiers, allowing renters to potentially buy their first home – how terrible. Appalling!

The position of this government is that a rent cap would take rental properties off the market, discouraging investment in housing stock and transferring property to owner-occupiers. What we saw from their housing statement was a privatisation of public housing and a reliance on industry to drive the creation of more social and affordable housing. This critique relies on the assumption that housing must be an investment – that we must rely on the private market to give people a roof over their heads. Housing should not be treated as a commodity, it should be treated as a human right. We cannot continue to rely solely on a supply-and-demand argument. We have never had more homes per head of population in Australia than we do right now. One million homes in Australia sit empty every night. This is not simply a supply issue, it is an issue that speaks to the very nature of what we allow as a society. The business of housing, the business of a roof over your head, the business of your right to a safe and secure home – that is the road we are going down in Victoria. I do not know about you, but to me that is terrifying. This crisis is urgent. Housing is a major driver of inequality, and the current policy framework is a bandaid to wider issues. We have an opportunity here in Victoria to stand up and say that everyone deserves a home. Let us take this opportunity and get serious about tackling the rental crisis.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:09): I also rise to speak on the Residential Tenancies Amendment (Rent Freeze and Caps) Bill 2023. Across Australia we are experiencing a housing crisis. A lack of supply, interest rate increases and many other factors are putting additional and huge cost-of-living pressures across all Victorians, across all Australians and across people in my community of the south-east. Instances of rental stress and mortgage stress have risen. It has become a lot harder for all people to enter the housing market, and I know that has been the case for far too many of my constituents. We do have some severe issues in our housing market, and as a member of the Legal and Social Issues Committee I too have had the opportunity to dive into this issue quite a bit deeper in recent times. There are a lot of things I could say about this bill, but I think, to cut to the chase, the main thing I would say is: if I thought that this bill would achieve what it sets out to do, if I thought that this bill would have a positive impact on the housing crisis that we are seeing, I would support it. But it does not, so I do not.

Despite the best efforts of my Greens colleagues on that inquiry to paint a picture that rent caps were the way forward, the evidence that we saw in that inquiry was actually quite to the contrary, and I will dive into some examples briefly if I have the time. We also saw of course in that inquiry some green shoots – one of those green shoots being that Victoria is actually the national leader by quite some margin in fact when it comes to the build-to-rent sector. That is a sector that will continue to be supported by this government as part of Minister Kilkenney's housing statement, which has recently also been announced. It is one of the many things that we will need to rely on under this extremely ambitious and, dare I say, unprecedented plan to fix the housing crisis in Victoria, to home as many people as we can and to do so in a way that is sustainable.

Referring to the documents motion I spoke on this morning, to do so in a way that is sustainable means putting more development in a sensible fashion in inner- and middle-ring suburbs without leaving the outer suburban areas such as mine to take the full brunt of our population growth. We have many exciting things going on in the south-east, as we do of course in all our growing suburbs across this state, but for too long there has been too much pressure on those growth areas to absorb the population growth for Victoria. Indeed that is the story that has been replicated across the country. My relatives in Perth recently told me, about the suburban growth out there, that their outer suburbs extend to the north and to the south just as far as ours do out to the south-east, and in a city with a population less

than half of Melbourne's, that is quite staggering. Nevertheless that does not take away from the fact that we still have a significant challenge here to address, and I acknowledge the work that Minister Kilkenny has already done and continues to do in this space.

I would also like to take a moment to just touch briefly on the quite significant rental reforms that have also been implemented by the Andrews and Allan Labor governments. There are far too many for me to go into detail, but to put it quickly: restricting rent increases between successive first-term rental agreements; removing incentives for agents to evict tenants to facilitate further rent increases; banning all types of rental bidding; protecting renters' personal information and standardising the application process for rentals; extending notice of rent increases and notice-to-vacate periods to 90 days; of course a big announcement in establishing Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria, which will enable parties to resolve disputes without having to go through the time-consuming and currently quite delayed VCAT process; and also holding property managers and agents accountable by introducing mandatory training and licensing for industry professionals. There are in fact so many I could continue going on and listing the 130 reforms that this government has made in this space – everything from sensible modifications to rentals right through to allowing renters to keep pets, which is obviously a very commonsense reform that of course our not-so-commonsense friends in the Liberal Party opposed when that came into this place as well.

I will quickly highlight three case examples – where rental caps have been implemented, where they have been tried, they have failed. They failed in San Francisco, where the landlords of rent-controlled properties started selling to owner-occupiers or moving their investments to other types of real estate like condominiums or newer buildings which were not subject to the rent caps. We saw property development shift towards higher-income, harder-to-obtain homes, and rent control raised rents in San Francisco by 5.1 per cent. In New York City we saw a similar thing. Indeed we also saw, in another American jurisdiction in Massachusetts, that when rent caps were repealed in the suburbs of Boston there was an exponential growth in rental supply, once rent control was abolished, and also in housing maintenance as well. We know how important it is – at least those of us on this side of the chamber – that housing should be not just available but habitable, and we have had many other debates on related issues. Unlike others, including the Greens party, we do not think that people should be required to live in substandard living arrangements, even if they are in public or social housing – unlike they do appear to advocate for.

There are a number of reasons to oppose this bill, and I do not have all of the time today to go into them. But this is a government that is getting on with addressing both the direct nitty-gritty issues that are affecting renters in this state but also more substantially addressing those issues, as I say, through the housing statement, and I am very much looking forward to seeing that work continue as well. I do not commend this bill the house.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (15:15): I rise today to contribute on the Residential Tenancies Amendment (Rent Freeze and Caps) Bill 2023, also known as the rent freeze and caps bill 2023, which the Greens have proposed. The coalition does not support this bill. We believe that governments should not control rental prices for everyone. This approach does not solve the rental crisis, it makes it worse. Instead we should focus on reducing bureaucracy and delays in land development. By doing this we should increase the number of homes available to support Victorian families, whether they choose to live in an apartment or a house. It is important to make the approvals process faster to expedite the process. We all can agree that rent is reaching a very high level, especially when it is reaching 20 to 30 per cent of people's income.

It is not just rent. Inflation has been high for the last several years, and everything is more expensive than it was before. People are suffering, especially those on low incomes who are just trying to make ends meet and cannot afford to pay any more than they have to. An increase in rent in some circumstances can cause a real crisis in these people's lives and for their families. Too often some might have to move out and look for places to live. Some might not find another place to live, whether they have a family or not. We hear of situations where people cannot find a location – a home or just

a place to rest their head. Some have stayed in cars, some have stayed in tents and, worse, some have stayed on the street.

Many families are facing significant challenges due to rapid population growth. I will give you an example. In my electorate alone in 2023 over 43,000 new arrivals moved into Rockbank, Mount Cottrell, Fraser Rise and Plumpton, nearly matching the population of Werribee itself. So it is crucial to highlight that the Housing Industry Association has forecast a shortfall of 200,000 homes by 2028. Additional research from the Institute of Public Affairs indicates an even larger shortage with 250,000 homes needed in the coming years. To tackle this issue we need to have an aggressive construction strategy to meet the housing needs for the population growth and to prevent further rent increases. In the 2023–24 financial year alone 49,000 homes were built in Victoria. However, the population in our state is more than three times that level.

When we speak about experiences of rental hardship, I just want to express that I spent my childhood growing up in a rented two-bedroom home at a period when there were nine people – three families – under one roof. I understand the struggle renters go through, and the discussion has given me flashbacks to those times in my childhood – of every sacrifice my parents had to make and things that I missed out on that other kids had. Many of my constituents in Western Metro Region are now facing very similar circumstances, having arrived in this country. So the housing rental crisis is a serious concern not just to us in this chamber but to the whole state and the country. People have the right to live somewhere that is clean and comfortable and feel safe – yes, we agree on that, and we advocate for that. We can turn a house into a home – a place that enables them to live and flourish in life, get to work, raise a family and offer hospitality to their friends.

We know we need to do these things to stop rent going up. However, a different approach is this. When my family was going through this, instead of demanding the government take control, my family focused on trying to get work and trying to own a home. That was our approach. I remember a time we had to travel three states in one year to actually land a job. If that is the approach we want so we earn enough money, we understand the hardship, but you need to own a home. So this bill before us now is trying to fix a problem – which I can reflect on with very similar circumstances that I have gone through – and that is high rents, by going through two things. First, you want to freeze rent for two years at the price that was paid on 1 January 2023. Second, you want to cap increases of rent at 2 per cent every two years. Controlling rental prices in this way is just a temporary fix with short-term benefits, but the problem with this is that it will have negative consequences over the long term for renters. So I will be opposing this bill, and I will explain the negative consequences in relation to the proposal.

In a situation like this, it is a temporary fix. If this bill passes, a fixed price will make it cheaper, which is a temptation for any government during this crisis, but why has the government not avoided temptation? We learned the lesson from history. Price control has been tried many times in many different markets, many different countries and many different situations. While it seems good at first sight, it is usually followed by negative consequences, and I will give you the example of Europe, where rent control had been implemented in various cities. It consistently showed the same result: that rent control does not work. The two main consequences for controlling rent are, first, that it reduces supply and availability of rental houses. As a property owner in this space in our state, average Victorian mums and dads make up 80 per cent, so whoever invests in this dream will exit the market, and it will gradually exceed incomes on a rental income. Secondly, it will lead to a decline in quality of the available homes. Before any investment property is taken off to sell, they will try to compensate and keep up the maintenance repayment. Unfortunately, the result is a decline in quality control and the property you live in will suffer. As a result, those renting will suffer in return. Both of these are bad for renters and landowners.

The first and most negative consequence to rent control is that it will reduce supply, which exactly opposes what we want to do. The price in a free market is determined by the interaction of supply and demand; demand is not something the state can control. It is up to the federal government to determine

the level of immigration and population growth, but supply is something the state can help influence: how many houses we can build and how fast we can build them. Supply is determined by property development and a house building prediction in response to effective demand from buyers. All this interacts with incentives set by the state government. When the incentive mix is right, supply is strong relative to demand and rent prices will slowly go down. These are the only effective long-term solutions and strategies that can achieve rental affordability that we want to see, but this bill before us will produce the opposite.

There are many places in Australia to invest. People can invest in public stock, in government bonds and private equity. They can also invest in property. By purchasing a house and letting it out, you are making an investment for yourself and supplying something the market and others want – namely, a home to rent. Property investment is not something that the ultrarich do; mums and dads are the Victorians who invest most in rentals. For many mum-and-dad investors, the majority are not wealthy and have just one or two properties. They make up the majority of investors. For investment to work, we must be able to charge a price to cover the cost to repay the bank and the cost for maintenance. But if capped prices are imposed, the cost will go up, because unaffordability causes the person to sell the goods. Right now housing ownership costs are going up. Interest rates and mortgage payments are going up, council rates are going up, everything is going up with the cost of living we are going through at the moment. Victoria has the highest property tax in Australia, and for that you can always ask those across the chamber why.

If we impose a rent freeze and rent caps while the cost of owning a house goes up, this will leave landlords out of pocket, a point which is a strong incentive for them to sell and offer short-stay accommodation instead. This means a house will go off the market, reducing rental availability. There are those who say, ‘Who will buy them – renters will buy them.’ Well, they may not be in a position to buy. It may cover part of the market, but it does not cover all of the market. Those who suffer the most are those who cannot afford to buy; that is why they rent in the first place.

The long-term consequence is that if this bill passes, the prices are fixed artificially low. Investors will simply stop buying homes to rent, and they will invest in capital elsewhere. When investors stop buying developments and stop buying homes for rent, we know what will happen. A good example of this is from Stanford University. In 2019 in San Francisco the housing market found there was a 15 per cent drop in housing supply after rent controls were introduced. The reduced supply of rental houses was exactly the opposite of what they wanted to achieve overseas.

The second negative consequence of rental controls is the effective ability of the landlord to carry out rental repairs. As I mentioned before, if you reduce the payment, then the landlord cannot cover their maintenance costs. If the Greens’ answer to that is, ‘Well, we will force the landlord to do expensive maintenance,’ then many landlords will respond by taking their homes off the market and selling. Again, this is not what we want to see.

In closing, this is a complex area of policy. Many different participants have many different needs which interact in a complicated way. Trying to intervene in the market with a blunt instrument is behaviour that will not solve this type of housing need. It is misguided and ultimately self-defeating. The fundamental solution for stress in all housing markets is to increase supply, not government control. Only a collection of measures acting together across the housing ecosystem will boost supply and in the long run improve the housing market at all. But a rent freeze and caps will not boost our housing supply, which is why I stand here opposed to this bill.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (15:27): I rise today to make a contribution to what has been a really wideranging and illuminating debate on the Residential Tenancies Amendment (Rent Freeze and Caps) Bill 2023. I am speaking in support of course of this Greens bill to cap and freeze rents while we are all here in the midst of a housing and a rental crisis and a cost-of-living crisis that is biting for so many people across the state. So it is timely that the Council is spending time going into debate on this bill, which puts forward a sensible partial solution to the housing crisis that we all

face. In addition to the valuable contributions that have come from across the chamber, my colleagues Dr Ratnam, Mr Puglielli and Dr Mansfield have each spoken to this bill, so it is my pleasure today to also provide some comments in support of the bill and summarise the Greens position on why action to freeze rents and then to cap them is essential as we see the dual cost-of-living crisis and housing crisis crippling so many people across our state.

In short, the function of this bill is that it implements a rent freeze for two years if passed, and it would also ensure that tenants cannot be subjected to unlimited rent rises, which are currently permitted under Victorian Labor – unlimited rent rises that we are experiencing during a housing crisis and a cost-of-living crisis. We are in a time when rents are rising faster than inflation and certainly much faster than wages. We are seeing historically high rates of rent, and that is being compounded by other factors in the economy that mean that household budgets truly are stretched. Unlimited rent increases – we have all heard the stories. We have heard the stories from people in our electorates contacting us in absolute distress about the pressures that unlimited rent increases are putting onto households and individuals. These of course may mean a tenant is unable to actually afford their home, the roof over their head, and they may actually be in direct housing stress and even at risk of homelessness. We have heard contributions – it is horrifying to think that here in Victoria in this day and age we have families living in caravan parks and we have families living out of cars. We must act and explore all the solutions to bring about an end to this situation.

Access to safe and secure housing is one of the most basic human rights. The reality for us in this state is that about a third of our population, a third of Victorians, are renting. For many of these households, far too many, the choice – if there is a choice, if you are able to sustain your housing – that you are facing can literally be between paying your rent and buying food or paying your rent and going to see the doctor to get that visit that you have been putting off, often with the ever-present fear that you are inching closer and closer to homelessness. I have been contacted personally by tenants who are in fear that for reporting just everyday maintenance requests they may face the threat of eviction or homelessness.

The bill seeks to end those notices to vacate that can be issued without cause. This is a situation that exists in Victoria, but it is uncommon actually when we compare ourselves to some other countries in the OECD. The bill seeks to end notices to vacate issued without cause solely for the fact that a fixed-term residential agreement is coming to an end, and we commonly see some landlords issuing that notice to vacate in order to increase the rental asking price once relisting the property. Too many tenants have already suffered under this legislative loophole. Too many people have seen their housing taken away only to see the listing pop up at an inflated price weeks later. The bill seeks to end that loophole. It also seeks then to implement a two-year rent freeze and thereafter limit rental increases to 2 per cent every two years.

Together with ending no-cause notices to vacate, these are actually sensible measures. They do not stop people charging a reasonable rent, but they do put in place some guardrails that will mean that someone's home is not just thought of purely as someone else's investment asset. It is timely to note that evicting a tenant for no reason, even at the end of the lease, is already prohibited in many comparable OECD countries. We have heard a lot of contributions from the chamber that this is some wild and crazy idea. These measures work in other jurisdictions, and the inability of this chamber to contemplate a sensible measure put forward in good faith that would alleviate the stress and distress that many tenants across Victoria are facing at the moment is telling. It is telling about the blinkered approach that we are taking to the housing crisis.

The bill also allows for exceptions for certain circumstances, such as for capital improvements. This does mean that works to improve a premises above its existing state, works such as renovations – but not everyday repairs, everyday maintenance or work done to meet minimum standards – would be an allowable reason for a notice to vacate. We have had some contributions saying that this measure would be in effect bringing down the quality or standards of properties for offer for rent in this state. It is simply untrue. The measures for exceptions to allow capital improvements do mean that

improvement to stock is possible. We have seen examples in comparable contexts including in France, Germany and parts of the US where rent controls can and do exist with healthy housing markets which work more fairly and in line with the public interest. We see that those are especially functional where they are in combination with strong protections for tenants. We know that we have a lot of catching up to do in this state, especially considering the large proportion of people who are now facing renting as a long-term or indeed lifelong situation.

I do acknowledge the steps that have been taken by the government. We heard Mr Galea outline a number of those in his recent contribution. It is a great start, and it is really good to see the government acknowledge the need that tenants are facing. What I would say while we are in discussion on this bill is we are not done; there is so much more to do. Contemplate this – it is a measure that is working in other nations and in other jurisdictions, and it certainly should not be beyond the ken of our Parliament.

We have seen some new research published recently that puts a figure on how much this sort of rent freeze would have meant to households in Victoria, in Melbourne specifically. The most recent figures established that if we had seen a rent freeze implemented, households could have saved over \$2500, which would go a very long way for some household budgets as we are facing this cost-of-living crisis in alleviating some of the pressures that they are dealing with every day.

It is disappointing but not surprising that we have met such resistance when we have a really practical measure that is available to this Parliament. One of the frustrating things is that we are met with derision, with shouting down of the idea and with a blanket refusal to engage with the idea, but we will not be discouraged. We will keep advocating for those residents who are stuck renting or who are in long-term rental accommodation that is their home, and we will try and try until we get through to this government to help them understand that this is within their power. We have a bill before the Parliament that would allow it to proceed, and it would have a real impact now on the day-to-day lives of Victorians – more than many of the other solutions that are important and are being canvassed but, let us be frank, are far in the future. This is something that could make a difference now.

I will turn to some of the contributions that have been made and reflect on some of the ideas that have been put before the chamber throughout this debate. Dr Mansfield told the house that Denmark introduced a new 4 per cent inflation-linked cap after they saw that rents were rising too fast, and here in Australia the ACT links rent caps to inflation and the sky has not fallen in there. Investors continue to enter the market, and even the Real Estate Institute of the Australian Capital Territory has said that rent caps there are functioning fine; it is additional protection in the market for people who rely on rentals to make their home. We actually also have a very recent relevant example here in Victoria. During the pandemic of course, we will recall, the national cabinet coordinated with the full participation of the current government here in Victoria a comprehensive freeze on rents nationwide as a proportionate response to the crisis that faced all Australians at that time. What I would put to you is that the housing crisis is no less severe. The current housing crisis is in many cases more evident than we saw during the pandemic during 2020–21. We acknowledge some of the steps that have been taken, but we would encourage the government to seriously consider and put their minds to, rather than shout down, this idea that has been put before them for a cap and a freeze on rents.

I have had conversations with some in my community, and I have heard some contributions that accuse this of being a political stunt and appealing to a particular demographic. Of course this idea is popular amongst those who rent. Of course people who are renting want to see those unreasonable unlimited rent rises stopped. But I have also had conversations with people who are investors and who are landlords who are supportive of the idea of guardrails and having a reasonable cap and guidance as to what an appropriate rental increase might be in the years to come. I have had those conversations with people out in the community, particularly in my electorate of Southern Metro, and I have spoken to people in Albert Park who can see the value of this. They say that as people who take seriously the responsibility of providing a home to someone and would like to see an end to some of the unreasonable unlimited rent increases that were opportunistically imposed on tenants as we came out of the pandemic. They do not agree with that behaviour and are supportive of this idea as well.

Dr Ratnam also made the key point that the Labor government has refused to acknowledge all the evidence available to us and has instead developed a housing policy that really fails to disrupt the fundamental driver of the housing crisis. One of the biggest elephants in the room here is the commodification of housing. When we are treating housing as a commodity and not recognising that it is in fact a fundamental human right, we do end up in this situation where we have unlimited rent increases – unlimited rent increases allowed by the Labor government – putting tenants at the mercy of people who are unscrupulous.

I will take the time I have to address an inaccuracy that was put to the chamber in Ms Watt's speech. It has been a bit of a common tactic unfortunately from this Labor government to try and pass the buck and when it comes to the housing crisis to point the finger at local government. Well, we know, and we have seen reporting that reveals, the inaccuracy of this comment. In fact local governments are largely supportive of the provision of an adequate and diverse housing supply and are approving permits. In relation to the particular example that I understand Ms Watt put in her contribution, of Gronn Place, it is really important to acknowledge that the Victorian government, the Labor government, has taken away community and local government rights in relation to some of the redevelopments, and it is beyond the pale to be pointing the finger at local council whilst at the same time embarking on the wholesale demolition of Victoria's public housing towers and the privatisation of that incredibly valuable public land.

One of the points Mr Puglielli made, and I will reinforce this, is that the cost-of-living situation has become even more urgent than last year, and we need urgent action here in Victoria. Here is a bill that gives you a mechanism to take action now that will provide immediate relief. It is totally within the power of this Parliament to examine this issue, to give it the meritorious examination that it requires, to freeze rents, to cap rents and to provide relief for Victorians.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:43): Thank you, everyone in the chamber today, for your contributions on the continuation of this bill debate. As I think has been noted both today and in previous debate iterations, I think we can all accept that we have a very big problem here. There have been a range of different views that have been presented to this house with regard to how to address that problem. Well, generally speaking I think most speakers have sought to do so, to put those solutions forward, so I will just seek briefly to go through some of what we have heard thus far in consideration of the bill that is before us.

For context, we are talking about a bill that effectively freezes the rate of rent from 1 January 2023, at that rate, for two years and then that is capped at a 2 per cent increase for each two years that follow. The premise behind this, which I am sure we may go into shortly in committee, is to allow wages to catch up with the astronomically high rates of rent that Victorians are currently having to pay and that are putting financial pressure, significant pressure, on so many people – people having to choose between whether or not they are going to eat that day or whether they are going to be able to pay for their rent. In the contributions that have been put before us, as I said, we have accepted that we have a problem, but really the question for this house now is: are we going to use the powers that we have as parliamentarians, perhaps with this bill before us, to fix this, to really take this head-on?

What has been put forward by some in this debate process has been the idea of investor flight, and we heard about this during the committee inquiry into housing affordability – this idea that under a proposal of rent freezes or rent caps homes would seem to vanish from the market or supply would be 'destroyed'. I think that was the word that was used in today's debate contributions from the Liberal Party. This is quite a dramatic way of talking about, really, someone selling their property. As was put by, I believe, Ms Payne in her contribution today: what is the outcome when someone sells their property? It is that it is bought by another person. And that person could be another investor or, heaven forbid, that person could be an owner-occupier buying their home, possibly their first home. I think that across all political lines here in this place we can accept that that would be a good outcome – someone being able to buy their first home and have that security of having a roof over their head and not being subjected to astronomical increases in rent year after year. So I would put to this house that

this idea of investor flight is not as scary as it is made out to be. Potentially it is a rebalancing of a very, very unfair market that has disproportionately impacted so many people who rent – people who should not be treated as second-class citizens purely due to the fact that that is the way that they are able to put a roof over their head. We need to address that inequality that exists currently in the Victorian community, and that is one of the core aspects that is inherent to this bill and its intentions.

We have heard a lot of contributions from across all sides, I believe, talking about the idea of supply. Again, this came up at length during the committee's deliberations on this issue or on housing affordability more broadly. Supply absolutely is a part of the conversation, and it is important that we have homes to meet the demand for homes that exists across Victoria and, I would say, also across our nation. That is going to be something we continually have to deal with as legislators in this place. However, painting supply – a very sort of blunt term – as a panacea to this issue I think is quite naive and really does not acknowledge the imbalances and the inequalities that currently exist in the system as we have it. The market, so to speak, has not resolved this issue, so that begs the question of this chamber: what do we then do as legislators, as people with the power to make change and to address systemic issues like those which I am describing? Surely we should take it on ourselves to do what we can to make that system better. And if we put the right measures in place, sure, the market may then figure itself out, but as of right now that has not occurred.

So on behalf of so many Victorians who rent, so many people who are doing it tough right now, people who are struggling with the rate of their rent increases, who are feeling as though they are being treated as second-class citizens in Victoria, we have to do what we can to fix that problem. So many people here across all sides have acknowledged that problem exists, and I am relieved that we are acknowledging that across party divides. This is a significant issue here, and wishing away the problem does nothing. We have to do something to address this significant concern that is held by so many in the community and, as has been acknowledged, people who are dealing with the rates of their mortgages as well. The housing system as we currently know it is broken. We need to do what we can to address it.

To continue on supply, it is important to acknowledge what type of supply we are actually referring to. In some contributions I believe – even possibly today – we have heard a bit of this. Supply on its own with no qualification is risky. If you were to increase supply of penthouse apartments by huge amounts, for example, I do not think that necessarily addresses the concern for someone who is on a low wage, someone who is perhaps on income support who needs a roof over their head, because they cannot afford that. Sure, there is a broader market-wide conversation here, but what we need to see is that the supply that is being added into the market is accessible to people who need a home right now, and we know that that is so often people who are struggling to pay their bills, struggling to pay their rents and struggling to deal with the cost-of-living crisis that is gripping our state right now.

That is why in other contributions that I, my colleagues and others have made to this chamber we acknowledge the other parts of the conversation – like public housing, for example – and acknowledge that when we have a system that cares for everyone by having the provision of social and public homes where they are needed for the people who need them, that then has a flow-on effect on the experience of renters across the community that are coming to each of us, as members of Parliament, telling us how they are doing it so tough right now.

Factoring in this idea of supply, if it was put to me and put to this chamber purely at face value that we should increase supply – supply, supply, supply – if we are talking building public homes, if we are talking a massive ramp-up of social housing across Victoria and that is what we mean when we are talking supply, then that is a fantastic idea. I would love to see everyone in this place get behind that. But too often I think, with this flag of the idea of supply being waved in this debate, we are actually talking about profiteering corporations and property developers effectively looking to make a profit, as is their business model, and to build whatever they like wherever they like, and I do not accept that as a panacea for fixing this issue. If it were the case, I do not think we would find ourselves

with the problem we are beset with right now, so I will put that to this idea of supply that has come up in each iteration of this debate coming to this house.

We also heard somewhat of a commentary with regard to international jurisdictions and conflicting views really in terms of whether or not those jurisdictions have succeeded in having those measures put forward, whether or not it has worked out for those communities. We specifically I believe heard reference to New York, for example; we heard about San Francisco. I think there is a valuable conversation about looking at each jurisdiction, each model that has been put forward, and examining in significant detail what has actually occurred in each place, because no two places are identical, as I think this chamber will agree. However, before even getting to that point I do think it is worth this house acknowledging the idea that if those measures were not put in place in places like New York, in places like San Francisco, without rent controls, just imagine how much worse those housing markets would be, how much worse the inequality of access to housing would be in those places, how much more unaffordable it would be for renters in those places. I do think again that that sometimes is lost in this conversation of comparison to international jurisdictions. But as I have said, I think looking at those in great detail perhaps could happen in a future debate slot on this bill. That would be something well worth doing. But I do think too often we get the headline approach to comparison of jurisdictions and not the detail that is so desperately needed to really do justice to this issue and examine it at length.

We have heard expression to the effect that we cannot be frantic in our approach to dealing with this issue, that we cannot rush in with a policy. It has been put forward that this policy is not well thought through et cetera, that we cannot take steps that have, as has been put by some, backfired in other places. As I have just indicated, for some of those locations I do think we have to go into more detail about what actually took place. What were the other factors? What is our definition of success? Is it, as I would put, someone having access to a home, a roof over their head – someone who is not in such a dire situation that we are seeing right now, where people are having to choose between paying for their food, paying for their medication, paying their medical bills, paying for their kids' school costs and weighing that up with their ability to pay their rent on any given week? That is not a living condition that I think we should accept here in Victoria or elsewhere in our nation.

As I think I indicated just before, there is an idea that has been floated in this debate either today or on other occasions that rent freezes force supply to dry up. As I indicated earlier, I do not think that is based on evidence. I think that is based on theory, and too often, as is the nature of things in politics, I think, 'Where are some of these perspectives coming from?' I do think there are probably concerns from people with a financial interest in this sector perhaps weighing in on the political debate and getting in the ears of our politicians. I do not think this idea of drying up supply, as I talked about earlier, is well founded. A result of bringing a balance back to the housing market, as we currently see it, where people can perhaps enter that market for the first time and buy their first home I think is a wonderful thing to aspire to. So I do not quite buy into this theorised drama that is put into this conversation. I think we have to be quite serious – this is a serious issue – and rational in how we are actually approaching this issue. I do welcome, nonetheless, feedback from others across this place on ways of moving forward to address the concerns that have been raised by so many with the MPs in this chamber.

I will also remind the chamber – it was several months ago, to be fair, but I am unaware if I previously referred to it – of the pandemic rent freeze, the moratorium that took place in Victoria before I was elected to this chamber. In the reporting from the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into the issue of housing affordability, it was what was deemed an emergency measure to deal with the state of crisis that was before us with the flow-on effect of people's ability to pay rent during those times, acknowledging that that was a crisis situation and that steps needed to be taken by the state Parliament, by members of this place, to address what was a looming threat to people's ability to keep a roof over their head. What I will also put to this chamber, as I have done already, is that we are in a crisis. So acknowledging an emergency measure that was taken during the time of COVID I do think

is well worth us considering again, because if you are hearing from renters right now from anywhere across our state, they will tell you that they are in crisis. They want us to do what we can to address their concerns to make sure that they can afford to keep a roof over their head and to make sure that they are not treated as second-class citizens in the state of Victoria.

Again, this bill before us allows us to consider a solution to what is a crisis that is being accepted by people across the political divides of this chamber. We have a crisis before us. The question for us is: how are we going to deal with it? I would put to this place that this bill is a solution that we should be absolutely considering. Something that I will perhaps leave my contribution on, just looking at the time, is it is also worth weighing up that this is one bill before us – this is the idea of rent freezes and caps. This is one part of the broader housing conversation, as the minister has often put. There is a broad continuum of housing pressures and parts of the housing conversation, and rent is one part of that. It is one cohort: people who rent as their means of keeping a roof of their head. We can do both. These issues are not mutually exclusive. It is on us to do what we can to address what is a housing crisis. I commend the bill to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (15:59)

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Mr Puglielli, for your contributions, which have responded to a number of other contributions around the chamber on this particular bill. I would like to start with a bit of context, if I may, in terms of the quantum of stock and the volume of funding that may flow from the application of this bill and the circumstances that you have talked about, where it is indeed something that does propose to become law. How many private rental properties do we have in Victoria at the moment by way of split between metropolitan and regional Victoria?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is a really good question. I want to make sure I give you exactly the right answer. I will just seek further detail.

Harriet SHING: I am happy for you to provide that to me, if you can, on your feet now.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: To the Minister for Housing, I am happy to provide that detail.

Harriet SHING: Mr Puglielli, it is your bill, so it is important that, for the record, we have a good understanding of what is driving the rationale for your bill.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Minister, sorry; please go through the Chair. Mr Puglielli actually has the call.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Minister, for your question. I just wanted to make sure I could get the detail that was immediately available to me. Some of the specific breakdowns I might provide to you on notice because I do not want to take more of the chamber's time; we have got other business to get through today. Nonetheless, from what I could find we have got 624,000 rental homes across Victoria, approximately 27.5 per cent of Victorians rent, and my understanding is across our nation 82 per cent of renters are in rental stress.

Harriet SHING: So is that 624,000 figure the private rental figure for properties in 2021, in which case it is 624,671?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am just happy to confirm that for you in a moment, housing minister.

I am happy to clarify. I appreciate the follow-up, Minister. So as of the 2021 census it was 624,671 rental homes across Victoria.

Harriet SHING: Mr Puglielli, that is private rental properties across Victoria in 2021. What is the current data on the number of private rental properties across Victoria, and can we have an understanding of how that has been factored into the development of this bill, for the purposes of understanding impact?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: My understanding is we are forced to rely on census data, but I am happy to seek some further detail for you now.

Thank you, Minister, for your follow-up question. Given the time by which this bill was put to this house last year, if my memory serves me correctly, the bill was utilising the 2021 data. If you are referring to data from this year – obviously this bill was put before this place prior to this year – I would say there is going to be a non-perfect alignment of numbers that we are talking about. However, as I have indicated, in the formulation of this bill we are looking at the 2021 census data of 624,671 rental homes being in place across Victoria. You are talking to the current context. As I have indicated, we are looking at 82 per cent of people who rent across Australia being in rental stress.

Harriet SHING: Thanks, Mr Puglielli. So you are missing two years of accuracy in relation to the number of rental properties to which this bill would apply, noting that we can take it through to 2023, which is the date which appears at the top of the bill itself.

You have also referred to rental properties. I assume by that you mean, based on the census data of 2021, private rental properties. Can I ask you to provide the total number of rental properties covered by the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 which would be covered by the scope and contemplation of this bill?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am just going to seek further detail in respect to your question asked in good faith.

Harriet SHING: Perhaps, Mr Puglielli, on the foundation nature of these questions, if you just want to continue to seek the detail around them. I might take a seat, Deputy President, given the time, and Mr Mulholland might also have a simultaneous question while your five colleagues continue to work through the data.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am happy to make an attempt.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Yes, okay.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am happy to provide further detail on notice, as we have indicated. Nonetheless, in consideration of this bill before us, as we have indicated in contributions to this place, and also as I have indicated just in my previous response to you, we have used the 2021 census data. Using census data is often common practice in deliberation on issues like that which we are dealing with in this bill today. As I have indicated, there are 624,671 rental homes in place across Victoria. As housing minister, I imagine you quite possibly in the immediacy of what is going on right now have more access to data than I do. Nonetheless, I think in consideration of this issue, as I appreciate you are putting to this house, there are foundational aspects to the question which you are asking in good faith, so I am happy to provide those on notice. Nonetheless, what we are dealing with is a bill that applies to rental properties across the state. We are dealing with what has been put in contributions from all parties in this chamber: a crisis situation facing renters in which people are having to choose between food, grocery bills and medical bills and being able to keep a roof over their head. Dealing with the urgency of this issue, again I am happy to go and find the detail that is available to me as a non housing minister to provide assistance in deliberation on what is before us.

Harriet SHING: It is private, though. I do not do private housing. That is why I am asking you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Just on the interjection, yes, I appreciate fully that the current way that we talk about the housing continuum that we look at in Victoria, the current mode of operating for this government, is that there are several different ministers that deal with different parts of that continuum,

so oversight of private rental properties for example is perhaps something that is not in your purview. I do appreciate that, and so in good faith I am happy to provide further detail on notice to assist.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Mr Puglielli, does your bill freeze rents in real terms or nominal terms?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I thank the member for his question. I will just seek some further detail.

The advice I have received is that the rental freeze is nominal.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Given it is in nominal terms, do you accept that your rent cap bill would mandate a rent decrease in real terms, rather than simply being a cap?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I thank the member for asking his question. It is a very, very interesting idea, the idea of rents going down, but I will just seek some further detail.

Thank you to the chamber for offering me the capacity to seek further detail to questions which are being asked in good faith. The short answer is yes, because effectively what we are seeing right now is a housing market that is so broken and so pressurised that rents are going up and up and up. People are unable to afford them, and it is literally putting people into homelessness because they are unable to have access to a rental that they can afford. Answering in good faith, with the proposal that is put before us, realistically for many renters to fall back below that line of experiencing rental stress and paying less than 30 per cent of what they earn on their rental costs we are looking at a process of years. Literally it will take years for many renters to come properly down below that line as we wait for wages to catch up. As I have indicated in my contributions to this place, as have others, this is a big systemic issue that we are dealing with, so attempts to depressurise this market I think are noble given the severity of the crisis we are experiencing.

Joe McCracken: I move:

That the Deputy President report progress and ask leave to sit again.

Motion agreed to.

Progress reported.

Ordered to be further considered in committee of the whole on next day of meeting.

Motions

Budget 2024–25

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:16): I rise to speak to my motion. I know that we were having a very interesting debate on a very important issue. I know that members in the chamber wanted to continue with that debate; however, my motion is extremely important in the context of the state budget that was handed down last week. I move:

That this house:

- (1) acknowledges the government's thrifless disregard for the needs and taxes paid by Victorian individuals, families and businesses in the 2024–25 state budget, including:
 - (a) blowing out net debt to \$188 billion, with interest payments to soar to \$26 million per day by 2028;
 - (b) hiking up the fire services levy and introducing higher taxes on homes during a housing affordability crisis –

as we have just been hearing about in terms of the rental market –

- (c) cutting \$286 million from tourism at a time when Victoria lags behind Queensland and New South Wales in visitor numbers;
- (d) increasing the public sector wages bill by \$2.5 billion, while cutting vital frontline services across health, education, tourism and crime prevention;
- (e) funding cuts to family violence and women's policy programs and to vital medical research;

MOTIONS

- (f) funding cuts and backflipping on commitments made following the royal commission into the mental health system;
- (g) renegeing on critical infrastructure commitments such as airport rail and Geelong fast rail while proceeding with the \$216 billion Suburban Rail Loop –

which is a complete and utter dud –

- (h) charging Victorian families nearly triple to put bins out through an increase to the municipal waste levy;
 - (i) increasing the industrial waste levy paid by Victorian businesses;
- (2) calls on the Allan Labor government to:
- (a) reverse the funding cuts to critical jobs;
 - (b) reverse the tax increases introduced in the 2024–25 state budget;
 - (c) immediately provide a clear plan to clear Victoria’s debt; and
 - (d) commit to root-and-branch tax reform to reduce the burden on Victorian households and businesses.

I read that in because I think it is important to get the context of what we are dealing with here. Many of the issues that I have highlighted are affecting frontline services where the needs of Victorians in this latest state budget are not being met.

I talk about the needs of and taxes paid by Victorian individuals, families and businesses. We know those needs. They are maintaining the frontline services, those people that are in the jobs that are providing the basic services, whether that is health, education, transport, policing – all those areas where we know there are massive issues and we know that some of the cuts will go on to affect the ability of those frontline workers to do the work that they need to do on behalf of the community. Keeping the community safe is another area of core government business, and we know we have got a crisis with the crime waves that are occurring in many parts of the state. We know there are issues, and we know that the government wants to weaken bail laws and do a number of things and that they are not addressing that very serious problem that is front of mind for many people who have been affected by crime.

Stop the waste and mismanagement of taxpayers money, this ongoing waste and mismanagement where there is no care or oversight in relation to the huge blowouts that have occurred on infrastructure projects – \$40 billion worth of blowouts. This is an extraordinary amount of money that just seems to roll off our tongues, but it should not. It should actually stop people in their tracks. What on earth is going on when we have got \$40 million of project overruns? And you cannot blame COVID for this, because if you look at what was occurring with the government, the revenue was fairly stagnant. The expenditure was going up, and if you look at that debt, it was increasing. They are the facts. That is there, and I will come back to that.

We often hear about the issues in regional Victoria – fixing the roads, the basic maintenance. They have swapped around words in the budget. It is now ‘patchwork’ or something. It is not even maintenance. They have literally changed the wording in the budget when looking at this very significant issue. Obviously access to health care and having good education and maintaining standards of literacy and outcomes for children – I mean, our literacy, science and maths outcomes are falling, and that is not good for children as they enter the workforce and their adult lives. We must do better than that.

To return to the taxes paid by Victorians, we have got 55 new or increased taxes under this government – an extraordinary amount. That is where the revenue is coming into government from, apart from obviously the federal GST contributions. But the taxes that are being applied by the government are absolutely crippling businesses and individuals and investment in this state. You just cannot tax your way out of the massive debt that the government is saddling Victorians of this generation and future generations with, and that debt is soaring to \$188 billion in just a couple of years

time. Daily interest payments are going up to \$26 million a day. That is \$170 million a week. I mean, it is extraordinary.

That is putting our credit rating at risk. We have already had warnings from S&P and Moody's, the agencies that oversee this, saying this is a real risk. Victoria's credit rating is at real risk, and it is the lowest of anywhere around the country. That is a terrible indictment on this government. It is shocking that we are heading towards banana republic status. We are on AA and it will not take much for that to slide, and that should be very concerning for every single Victorian. You cannot deny that this debt – \$188 billion and \$26 million a day – is where this government is taking the Victorian taxpayer in terms of what it has got to do to maintain that level of debt and interest repayments. It is just appalling.

As I said, there were 55 new or increased taxes under Labor, and there were two more hikes in this latest budget. They have hiked up the fire services levy and introduced higher taxes on homes during a housing affordability crisis. We have had questions on the fire services levy and where that money is going to. It is not going into assisting our firefighters – \$106,000 is all the CFA got. This is just another tax grab that the government will go after. It is incredibly concerning that they are just going after money wherever they can get it.

I have spoken about the health tax – the GP tax. I mean, what a ludicrous tax that is – to be taxing GPs at a time when we need everybody to be supporting Victorians in their primary health care needs. You are taxing GPs and dentists and other medical professionals that lease rooms in medical clinics. The government is applying this ridiculous tax to these people. They are not employees. They are tenanted. They are contractors. They are not admin staff or a nurse who is paid and has holiday pay and long service leave and all sorts of other leave entitlements because they are employees of a medical practice. That payroll tax quite rightly is applied, but this government is going after GPs, when the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the AMA and others have said that is going to have a massive impact on their ability to conduct business. It will end bulk-billing, because the payment has to flow on somewhere. That cost has to flow on to someone, and that payment will flow on to the patient, so bulk-billing will go. Even the federal minister himself has said to states, 'Don't do this.' New South Wales and Queensland are looking at this. They have paused it – but not here, not Tim Pallas. He is going after everything that he can get his hands on, because they have saddled Victorians up to this extraordinary debt of \$188 billion.

The next issue is cutting funding from tourism – \$286 million from tourism – at a time when Victoria lags behind Queensland and New South Wales in visitor numbers. That is a huge cut to the tourism and the major events funding program. I mean, we pride ourselves on our major events. We pride ourselves on being the sporting capital of the country. Well, we are fast losing that very glorious title because the government is not providing the support for those two vital sectors to be able to promote events.

We saw what they did with the Commonwealth Games. They promised the world, conned Victorians and then left us embarrassed on the world stage. That reputational damage is huge, and that has ricocheted around the world. Of course major events are going to look at Victoria and say, 'There is real doubt about these people; look at what they do.' They have done that – this government has done that. The current Premier was the minister who oversaw the Commonwealth Games. She has also overseen the huge blowouts in the infrastructure costs. The Premier has a lot to answer for, because she sat around that cabinet table and made these decisions.

There has been a \$17 million cut to the destination Victoria program and a total of \$393.9 million cut from visitor economy initiatives, including for industry support, regional tourism, events and infrastructure. I have spoken about the Commonwealth Games. The government say, 'We'll put in \$2 billion. We've reallocated that.' The fact is the reputational damage – the huge disappointment to so many that were involved, small business and the like – and the patch-up work with the con job that they have done on that just show the level of disregard and hopeless management of the budget and decision-making process.

The government has increased the public sector wages bill by \$2.5 billion while cutting those frontline services, as I said, across health, education, tourism and crime prevention – those services where we have need – and we know that is happening. We know there were cuts in last year's budget to community health. When the amalgamations occur for hospitals around rural and regional Victoria, services will go and jobs will be lost. The AMA has said that when that happens, frontline jobs will be affected, and that is on top of the cuts already in the budget. This is a very bad budget. It is a very bad signal for many, many people. I know the Treasurer said it was a horror budget – well, it really is. It is a shocker.

There are funding cuts to family violence and women's policy programs and to vital medical research. We heard about the cruel cuts to the VCCC Alliance – 75 per cent of their funding has been cut. Professor Grant McArthur has spoken out multiple times on this and explained that they need this funding to be able to do this magnificent and significant work. Again it goes to the core of what research does in this state, and it is an area that should be championed and supported because of the truly magnificent work that so many research institutes and researchers do. But their jobs are at risk, the programs are at risk and so is the support to people with cancer – a huge and a very cruel blow. People that have experienced cancer, their family members and their friends all know what it is like. It is a terrible, terrible journey, and anything we can do to prevent that from occurring should be supported.

This government's priorities are all wrong. Putting them into the suburban rail link over cancer research – that says everything about this government. That is where their priorities lie. They do not even have support from the federal government. They are not supporting the dud suburban rail link. No money there – they will not do it. No, the whole damn thing is a damn dud. Honestly, it is just a disgrace, and the Premier should eat humble pie and scrap it, because the priorities are all wrong.

Evan Mulholland: Bill Shorten doesn't like it. He's telling everyone around town he doesn't like it.

Georgie CROZIER: He is, as are federal Labor ministers. Look at them all. They are all at war with one another.

Michael Galea: All at war? You'd know about that.

Georgie CROZIER: Well, you are at war with the paramedics and nurses as we speak. I was coming to that bit.

There are funding cuts and backflipping on commitments made following the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Mental health is, again, absolutely snubbed in this bleak budget. As my colleague Ms Kealy has said, it has been cruelly ignored. They have literally ignored the recommendations from their own royal commission. There is just so much wrong in relation to the government's priorities and the debt they are saddling Victorians with, when they are cutting funding from these very important areas like mental health and cancer research. They really must do better than what they have done in terms of talking about it but delivering very little – and that is the issue. We know of the increased numbers of mental health presentations in the acute system and the failures that are ongoing.

Reneging on critical infrastructure commitments such as airport rail and Geelong fast rail while proceeding with the \$216 billion Suburban Rail Loop – again, the government say one thing, they promise the world, and yet they renege on those commitments. They have done it time and time again, whether it is with the 10 community hospitals or the airport rail link or the Arden Street health precinct – all promised, all not going ahead. This government has got a very bad reputation for promising the world and conning Victorians and delivering little when it comes to some of these major infrastructure issues that I have referenced – the airport rail and the Geelong fast rail.

Charging Victorian families nearly triple to put bins out through an increase to the municipal waste levy. There is a cost-of-living crisis, and the government is going after another cost grab by doing that.

That is, again, where the priorities of the government lie – get money from wherever you can. That is literally what this Treasurer has done to try to plug a black hole of a huge and increasing – soaring – debt, where our interest rate payments of \$15 million, \$16 million today are skyrocketing to that enormous \$26 million a day that I spoke of. This should be a concern for every single Victorian, and I am glad to say there are more and more Victorians that are speaking out about it. They are concerned. They are very worried about the debt. They know it is bigger than that of Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania combined. They know there is no plan by this government to bring the debt down.

That leads me to the last little bit in the final few minutes that I have. My motion calls on the Allan Labor government to reverse the funding cuts to those critical jobs which I have outlined and reverse the tax increases introduced in the 2024–25 state budget. There are 55 that they have imposed on hardworking Victorians, and remember what Daniel Andrews said in 2014 – the biggest con man we have ever seen in this state. He looked down the camera and he said, ‘I give you my word, Peter, no new taxes or increases in taxes.’ Well, we have had 55 – 55 – and these increased taxes in this latest budget are going to hurt more Victorians.

The motion states: ‘Immediately provide a clear plan to clear Victoria’s debt’ – there is no plan. There is only a plan to tax Victorians further and spend further so that they just increase this almighty debt on current Victorians and future generations of Victorians. There is no plan to wind this back, and that, absolutely, is horrifying. Finally, the government needs to commit to root-and-branch tax reform to reduce the burden on Victorian households and businesses, as I have said. They are carrying this burden. They will be carrying it for many years to come. This government does not care. They do not care about taxpayers money; it is like Monopoly money for them. It is horrifying how they treat Victorian taxpayers with contempt in relation to how they oversee the management of money. Forty billion dollars in project overruns through waste and mismanagement, \$26 million a day in interest repayments, \$188 billion in debt – this is all going to be happening in Victoria in a couple of years time. This is not a game of Monopoly, this is serious, and the government just continue to brush it off, having no regard for this huge debt that they are saddling current and future Victorians with and the enormous interest payments that will add costs and further put our reputation at risk. I urge all members to support this motion.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:36): I rise to speak on motion 411 put up by Ms Crozier today in light of the recent state budget. I will take this opportunity to acknowledge what is indeed the first budget under Premier Jacinta Allan that was handed down just last week and acknowledge that this is a budget that at its core does a number of things. It delivers for Victorians, including on so many of the projects big and small that we told Victorians we would deliver on. It delivers on them. It helps families. We have spoken about this in this chamber repeatedly, and I am sure it will be the subject of much further discussion when the budget bills come before us, but the \$400 support payment for every government primary school student in the state is a significant win for families, especially as we are going through, as has been repeatedly discussed today as well, significant cost-of-living challenges.

This is a government that first and foremost recognises that we are here to govern for Victorians, not for ourselves, and that is why we do focus on delivering the services and infrastructure that we need, but we also recognise that when families need help, there are cases such as that that we see now, and that is why that \$400 school bonus is such a well-needed shot in the arm for so many working Victorian families, including so many of the ones in the south-east that I have the privilege of representing. It is also a budget that makes difficult decisions and does so in a way that achieves that without compromising on our core task of being there to govern and serve Victorians.

There are quite a few points raised by Ms Crozier in her motion. I will address just a few of them in the time that I have. In subsections 1(b) and 1(h) she references the fire services levy and the waste levy. I would note that firstly in the case of the fire services levy, despite some of the commentary that you hear, sometimes by those opposite as well, every dollar raised by the fire services levy goes

towards our fire services – towards the FRV and CFA – to support them in doing their work. Every dollar –

Evan Mulholland interjected.

Michael GALEA: Mr Mulholland, you very know well what I am saying. You know that the money that is raised is more than spent through expenditure and that the money that is raised is more than offset by whatever specific account it goes into. You know –

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Order! It is hard to hear Mr Galea with all the interjection.

Members interjecting.

Michael GALEA: I expect better from you. You should know all too well, Mrs McArthur, that every dollar and cent raised goes into supporting fire services. Whether that is done directly or not, you know that it all goes to that purpose, and indeed it is returning now to the level that was set by the former coalition government. Again, with the reforms of the last decade in fire services – we have seen changes in that space, and we have been able to reduce the fire services levy – we are now returning it to a point the Liberals had set when they were last in office.

With the waste levy, we are harmonising with our neighbouring two states, with New South Wales and South Australia. Representing Western Victoria, Mrs McArthur, I am sure you would be all too mindful of people from other states feeling free to dump their rubbish in Victoria with the cheaper rates that we provide, and this is a measure to stop that by harmonising with New South Wales and South Australia. Victoria is not a dumping ground for other states' rubbish, and this will achieve that.

Just as we have been a net contributor to the national economy for many years – in fact for well over 50 years and certainly in every year that the GST has been in effect – to use the old terminology of one of the litany of former federal Treasurers from those opposite, we are the lifters in terms of our national economy, and we continue to be. Even though we are now finally getting closer – and I say 'closer' advisedly – to a fair amount of GST, we are still not receiving every dollar that we spend in GST in this state back. We are doing better, which is good to see, and in light of commentary in the papers this morning I hope that our federal friends will continue to see that states that do contribute more than their fair share to the national economy like Victoria deserve to have at the very least their GST but also a fair share of infrastructure contributions, which we certainly have not seen, in contrast to New South Wales or Queensland. But it is nevertheless good to see our federal colleagues providing some further funding for infrastructure projects, making some small progress towards making up for the significant deficit in federal support over the last 10 years in particular.

In terms of infrastructure projects, Ms Crozier raised a wonderful project, the Suburban Rail Loop, again highlighting to voters in eastern and south-eastern Melbourne exactly why they should not vote for the Liberals at the next election – because you are saying to them, 'We are going to take away this project which is going to make it easier to get around Melbourne and we are going to take away tens of thousands of jobs.' Those are jobs in construction, those are jobs for electricians – you will take away those jobs if you cancel that project. This is a city-, state- and nation-shaping project that you do not support. You have failed to see that the people of Victoria –

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Order! It is getting hard to hear Mr Galea. Could we keep the yelling maybe a tad lower.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Mr Galea is entitled to be heard in silence.

Michael GALEA: It is more fun if they are not silent. But it is an important project because it is delivering transformational change to the way that we will be getting around our city. I know that I say this a lot, but it is the Liberals that keep bringing these motions into the chamber to talk about the Suburban Rail Loop. It is about people who are living in Cranbourne and going to uni at Monash or at Deakin, people in Pakenham who are commuting to jobs in Cheltenham or Glen Waverley or Box Hill, the future travel options that people will have and the induced demand that we can create through this project and indeed beyond that as well for people of Gippsland, who will have those same benefits too, which I am sure would interest you, Ms Bath. I know it certainly interests colleagues on our side, including Minister Shing, whose constituents in Eastern Victoria will also significantly benefit from that project. We see in the motion here from Ms Crozier the significantly exaggerated and aggrandised figure of \$216 billion, which is conflating a long-term capital spend with operating expenditure, all in an effort to paint the project to be something that it is not. She knows full well that stage 1 of the SRL is not a \$216 billion project, not on operating costs nor on infrastructure.

I think it is quite interesting – with the limited time I have left – we heard a lot from Ms Crozier in her contribution, but more interesting for me is what was not included, and that was any reference to the state of Victoria’s economy. That is obviously because the Victorian economy is actually doing extremely well. We are actually in many ways leading the nation. Unemployment is at 50-year historic lows, currently at 4.1 per cent. Regional unemployment is at 3.7 per cent, again a 50-year historic low. Employment as well is expected to increase by 225,000 jobs over the four years to the 2027–28 financial year. But we have already – this is not some fantastic figure that has been plucked – since September 2020 seen job growth of 560,000 new jobs in this state. That translates to one in every three jobs in this country that has been created since September 2020 having been created in Victoria – one in every three. For a state with a population that is roughly a quarter of the nation, for one in three jobs to be created in this state since the COVID pandemic just shows that businesses are investing in Victoria and businesses want to invest in Victoria.

Why wouldn’t they when we have reduced the regional payroll tax to a quarter of the level of what was set by those opposite? Regional businesses are paying 1.2 per cent, not 4.85 per cent, which you guys would have had them pay. We are also the first state to abolish the business insurance duty, which is expected to save Victorian businesses \$516 million over the next four years. Victoria is an attractive place to do business, and you do not have to listen to government MPs telling you that, you can look at the statistics. You can see the investment in Victoria; you can see the growth. For every new job that is created that is another person engaged in the workforce and contributing to the state’s economy as well. Through this budget we will also see net debt as a proportion of the gross state product stabilise and then decline. We have also seen – this is a good thing to finish on – Deloitte Access Economics forecasting the Victorian economy to grow at a faster rate than any other state over the next five years. Despite all that Ms Crozier wants to talk about, Victorians know that the state economy is going strongly. This is a government that has invested in people as well as the economy and will continue to deliver the support, the services and the cost-of-living relief that all Victorians need.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (16:46): I rise to support Ms Crozier’s motion and in particular its reference to the thriftless disregard this government shows for Victorians and the spiralling damage done to the productivity of our economy by the ever-increasing taxation levels. We seem to be immune to the numbers now. It is shocking that we are not more shocked about Victoria’s debt, but after a decade of budgets from Labor it has become just part of the scenery. The headline figures are bad enough. Total debt will rise consistently, from \$156 billion next year to \$188 billion by 2028. As a reminder, the debt level in 2014 when Labor came to power in Victoria was \$21.4 billion. From \$21.4 billion to \$188 billion – that is what a decade of Labor budgets have done for us. And that is the debt. The wild increase has come despite the huge increase in taxes, which Ms Crozier has told us about – 55 new or increased taxes since Daniel Andrews’s pre-election ‘no new taxes’ promise. That was just a blatant lie, we have now learned.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Bev McARTHUR: He is an absolute con man, Ms Crozier. If the tax take had remained constant and the debt risen, that would be a poor outcome but at least understandable. But to manage to simultaneously increase taxes and blow out the debt is almost incredible. The extent of economic mismanagement that feat requires is epic. We know why it has happened. It is not bad luck or unfortunate circumstances or even COVID, your much-flaunted excuse for everything. It is the inevitable result of any prolonged Labor government in Victoria or anywhere else. Labor governments do not believe in individuals. You do not believe in entrepreneurs, in small businesses. You mistrust them. That is why you tax them, you regulate them. You have a jaundiced view of anyone employing others, and the consequence is penalty after penalty and risk after risk being loaded on the backs of the productive part of our economy. It is not just a mistrust born of complete unfamiliarity with business and individual enterprise, it is also a vested interest of Labor's union paymasters, who want ever greater membership and power and need to show results to get numbers through the door.

A member interjected.

Bev McARTHUR: They are very good when we need to get the duck shooting happening, though, I must say – they have done a wonderful job – and for making sure you do not lock up the parks. They are doing a great job on that too. That is where we need them – out there fighting your ridiculous policies in that area. What Labor do fundamentally believe in is government, and when you like something, you like more of it and you want more of it. The result is writ large in this budget as Ms Crozier's motion references, with the 'thrifless disregard' in her introduction, the debt timebomb in (1)(a) and the public sector wage bill in (1)(d). As the old saying goes, if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And so it is with Labor. Any problem, real or political, must be solved by government, be it through new consultation, committees, commissioners, quangos, regulation or legislation. Last year's budget saw state revenue reaching \$99.9 billion by 2026–27, but the Treasurer has confirmed Victoria will now break the hundred-billion-dollar barrier by 2025 and hit \$107 billion by 2027.

Labor politicians love to boast about spending, and we have just heard Mr Galea wax lyrical about spending. But this big growth of big government is nothing to be proud of, Mr Galea. It is built on the backs of hardworking, enterprising Victorians, and one day those backs will break. Day after day government ministers and MPs in this place crow about spending as if it is good in itself, as if spending more money automatically means getting a better result. You do not have to look very far to see that in Victoria, under this government, that is a long way from true. We are soon to be a \$100 billion state, the biggest of the big spenders, and yet do we think that our roads, our health services, our education, our court system, our police and our housing situation have improved in the last decade? Has the outcome we have got today in all those areas been worth the heavier taxes and the \$180 billion of debt amassed?

Worse still is what has happened to the economy structurally in this time. Our outlook now seems bad enough on the headline figures, but the underlying economic truth is even more problematic.

A member interjected.

Bev McARTHUR: The library here – listen to what the library has done – has recently produced an excellent paper on manufacturing in Victoria. You need to read these things. It contains important analysis, particularly on the trends in the geographical location of manufacturing jobs and the changing subsectors of manufacturing employment. I would certainly recommend it. But I suspect that the clearest conclusion – the declining share of manufacturing as a share of the state's economic activity – does not need an in-depth research paper. It has been clear to us all for decades. Manufacturing is not the only sector to decline. Victoria now is a hollowed-out economy kept afloat by population growth, house construction, publicly financed infrastructure and booming property taxes. The economy has been pumped full by the steroids of population growth and massive public spending, and like any steroid injection, it is not sustainable. We have had force-fed growth. Like a foie gras goose, the economy has grown, but like the goose, it is not destined for a happy and long life. The poor old goose.

It is a fact: Victoria's budget is now 50 per cent more reliant on the revenue from stamp duty than it was 20 years ago.

Members interjecting.

Bev McARTHUR: Did you get that? I will have to repeat it because you made so much noise. Victoria's budget is now 50 per cent more reliant on the revenue from stamp duty than it was 20 years ago – 50 per cent more reliant on an inefficient and damaging tax which constrains our economy, discouraging people from moving, seeking new jobs or downsizing to appropriately sized houses. And we just heard about the housing crisis. The problem for housing in this state is state taxes, charges and regulations. That is why we have got a housing crisis. It is all your fault – 50 per cent more reliant on a tax, which makes Victoria incredibly vulnerable to a housing downturn. Like any Ponzi scheme, an economy built on population growth and housing construction no longer works when people stop buying in.

We know the government is addicted to this sugar rush economy. The statistics tell us so. In 2008 just 6 per cent of Melbourne property buyers paid the highest rate of stamp duty. Now it is fully one-third – 33 per cent of Melbourne property buyers pay the highest rate of stamp duty. That is why I commend the final part of Ms Crozier's motion, which calls on the government to commit to root-and-branch tax reform. We know you will not, but it truly would be the best for our state in the long term. Absolutely we need root-and-branch reform, and if you really want to do something good for this state, work with your federal colleagues and work on root-and-branch tax reform. This state desperately needs it. The original idea of the GST, for example, was to cut state taxes and duties – cut them. You were meant to get rid of them. You have just landed us another 55. That might be a good place to start. But we know that offered the same amount of money via a federal GST payment and locally raised stamp duty, a Victorian Labor government would always choose the latter. You would always choose your own taxes rather than what you could get. It is about control. That is what you are on about – control. It is about staying in the box seat, reserving the right to tax further and harder, not about economic efficiency and merely providing service to Victorians. And sadly, we know where this path ends. As taxes increase, businesses leave and the debt interest burden inexorably rises. *(Time expired)*

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:56): I rise to contribute on the motion from those opposite, and doing so gives me a great opportunity to talk about what we are committed to doing in this budget. The motion by Ms Crozier reads, and I will not read it all, but here are the main parts: that this house (1) talks about the needs and taxes paid by the Victorian community in the budget, and I think no matter what budget we pass, they are saying all the same talking points. But back to the motion: (a) it talks about the debt, and something that we on this side of the house and most Victorians know is that if we did not do what we did in Victoria to keep us afloat during COVID, we would have been in some real strife; and (b) it talks about the fire services levy and taxes. I am proud to support our fire services, and I will always support our fire services and what they do. In fact recently, you may not know this, but I completed the fire rescue Fire Ops 101 training program and had a great opportunity to experience a day in the life of a firefighter. There were simulations, training drills – the works – and the team were absolutely remarkable. I particularly want to single out Ed Starinkas and Kat Dunell for the opportunity to learn what it is like. I will not forget it anytime soon. This program has led me to a new-found appreciation of what our firefighters face, and that is why I am particularly proud to be a member of a government that is committed to providing fire services that protect Victorians and their properties to make sure that these services are appropriately funded.

The fire services property levy was put in place to fund our life-saving fire services following a recommendation from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. We all remember Black Saturday, and I also am old enough to remember Ash Wednesday. The fire services levy was also designed to grow in line with expenditure on fire services to keep up with demand, and when the FSPL commenced on 1 July 2013 under the former coalition government, the levy was collected to cost recovery of 87.5 per cent of the funding required for Fire Rescue Victoria and 77.5 per cent of the

funding required for the CFA. This year's budget returns the FSPL to its initial levy of cost recovery aligning largely with inflation.

I am quite shocked that this motion – back to the motion – at (c) talks about tourism. And the negativity – it compares us to New South Wales and Queensland. It is a bit odd for those opposite to be cheering on the other states, but I am proud of Victoria. That is why I do not want to go anywhere else except for Victoria, as we have it all. Mrs McArthur, over your way my wife and I visited Steiglitz at the base of the Brisbane Ranges. It is a great place to come across, and I was amazed to find a little courthouse that was there in a small town that used to be back in the 1800s a great little mining town. So we have got all sorts of great places in Victoria that we can visit, and those opposite tend to talk it down quite a bit. Then it talks about health and education and goes back to tourism and crime prevention, and soon I will try and address all of these by outlining our important work in these areas. The motion, at (e), draws light to women's programs, family violence and medical research – well, where do I begin?

The motion keeps going on, but let us address what we have so far. This budget has a focus on families. As the Premier has said, the Allan Labor government is committed to helping families with the cost of living, and that is what this budget is about. Think of the \$400 school saving bonus. This is a new commitment to the education of our kids, unlike what the motion suggests – a bonus for every student enrolled at a government school and for eligible families at non-government schools. It will give families with children at government schools and eligible families at non-government schools a \$400 boost to help with uniforms, camps, excursions and sporting events. In the history of our state's development education is the most important way to build our future. That is why we are building 100 new schools by the end of 2026, a pledge blown away with 75 new schools already in communities where they are most needed, and we are dedicating \$1 billion to the construction of the remaining 16, ensuring that every child, regardless of postcode, has access to quality education.

This budget is also delivering on the educational needs of my community in Southern Metro. In my community of Camberwell, which I know dearly miss their former hardworking Labor member of Parliament John Kennedy, we have delivered \$9.7 million in funding to Camberwell Primary School. It is happening. This school community deserves it. They are a pillar of our community and our state. In fact they are one of the only properly bilingual schools in our state – all students are taught in French and English, so the connection is real. But bricks and mortar do not make a school; it is the nurturing environment and environment of hard work, discipline, passion, care and compassion, the first-rate classrooms and the dedication of teachers that give our kids the best chance in life. That is why we have committed \$753 million to maintaining and enhancing our education institutions, from crucial maintenance projects ensuring safe environment learning spaces to the expansion of facilities in our fastest growing schools. We recognise the tireless service of our educators, the architects of our children's future. With \$139 million allocated, we have bolstered their ranks with professional development opportunities, mental health support and flexible working arrangements.

This year I have spent many days visiting kindergartens in my community of Southern Metro. We know that an early start equals the best start, and that is why, with \$129 million, we are continuing the rollout of three-year-old kinder and ensuring every child receives the start in life they deserve, setting them up for success, and we are investing \$19 million to renovate and modernise kinder facilities, fostering environments for growth and learning. And our commitment extends beyond the classroom walls. We recognise that there are diverse pathways to success, and therefore we are investing \$71 million to support young people to complete their secondary education at TAFE. Additionally, \$23 million is dedicated to improving access to our vocational education and training schools, empowering our youth with the skills to thrive in a workforce that is constantly modernising.

We are also funding \$6.8 million for the Glasses for Kids program, tripling the size of that program. This program will reach a further 74,000 prep to grade 3 students at 473 government schools across the state. The program will provide free screening and glasses for students who need them. It will also

help families by no longer needing them to juggle appointment times or to incur additional out-of-pocket costs.

As we know, this budget is focused on families, and a big part of families is sport. For me it was football, and for many of my kids it was netball – and it all adds up, especially if you have six of them. That is why the Allan Labor government is investing in a further \$6 million to extend this program, providing vouchers worth up to \$200 for eligible families for the cost of sports. The Get Active Kids voucher program has always been a popular one in my community, so I encourage as many parents as possible to use it as much as they can.

I also encourage parents in my community of Southern Metro to get their kids involved in swimming. It is a vital skill to have, and for a nation that is known across the world for its beaches, beach culture, surfing and more, not enough Australians have it. That is why I am proud that we are investing \$116 million for the active schools program, including \$73 million to support schools to run swimming and water safety programs for their students.

We are also investing \$11 billion for our healthcare system, helping our hospitals care for their patients and continue to recover from the impacts of the pandemic. We know our healthcare workers are heroes. They stood up for us in the pandemic, and we must always stand up for them where we can. We know that planning in this space is important, so we are investing \$8.8 billion to fund our hospitals in the long run, \$755 million to get new hospital facilities up and running and \$1.2 billion to address the Commonwealth reducing the funding to our hospitals and more. We are committing \$146 million to ensure that Ambulance Victoria has what it needs to meet the needs of our growing state and \$126 million to supply the blood and many related services that Victorians need when they need them.

We have got \$118 million to upgrade infrastructure at the Alfred, and that means a lot. It is only walking distance, a few hundred metres away, from my office, and it delivers world-class support. I have had the privilege to visit many times as a local member. It was only a few weeks ago when I had the pleasure to visit with the Deputy Premier, who in his capacity as Minister for Medical Research toured the world-class research facilities. That is why I know that \$40 million to continue upgrading and replacing the central engineering infrastructure is vital. They deal with our state's most critical infrastructure. I had to change outfits to ensure nothing was contaminated – the level of care that they take each day is incredible. We know the healthcare system is complex and ever adapting.

We know we need to support the national disability insurance scheme patients as best we can in a state government capacity, so I am happy that we are investing \$233 million to prepare for its next opening and changes to our state, particularly for my community of Southern Metro and for generations to come.

I am committed to finding a better way to protect first-time homebuyers and those building their family home from being taken advantage of, and I am proud that we are doing our part. Importantly, we are investing because it is setting our next generation up for life. From millions for skills and TAFE, cutting property taxes by millions – *(Time expired)*

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:07): I am pleased to rise to support Ms Crozier's motion 411 standing in her name. It is an absolute indictment of the government when you look at these facts that are on this motion: debt blown out to \$188 billion, with interest payments soaring to \$26 million per day by 2028. There are so many community-based infrastructure projects that are crying out for funding. There are schools that were not implemented. They were promised as a commitment by the Labor Party at the 2022 election; here they are, I listed them on the notice paper today – more than a dozen. These could be funded within a matter of a month if we were not paying \$26 million per day in interest rates. It is an abomination and it is unsustainable, and it is the reality of an Allan government.

We know that the government cannot manage money. We know that the government cannot manage projects. We have seen budget blowouts in many of the central Melbourne projects. We have seen in this government budget this week that they are lacking in transparency again in relation to major

projects – there are no costs listed for the Suburban Rail Loop, the Box Hill to Cheltenham rail line to nowhere. The fact that no major infrastructure organisation called for it, the fact that it is blowing out before it has started and the fact that it will cost my grandchildren's grandchildren into perpetuity are indictments of this government.

Recently I had a conversation with some very good people in the mental health space, and they were lamenting this government's abandonment of many of the royal commission recommendations. There have been funding cuts; it has backflipped on its commitment, as outlined in point (f) of this motion; and there is much sadness in relation to the loss of services that are so vitally needed right across Victoria but particularly in the Eastern Victoria Region as well. The government has cut the advancement of these 50 mental health and wellbeing locals, which are supposed to be that multidisciplinary triage centre for people in need, for people whose emotional and mental wellbeing is at stake. There are 15 out there, but there are supposed to be 50 all up, and this government has just pulled the handbrake on and delayed the rollout of a further 35. The funding has stopped and the rollout has stopped. They have kicked this particular development down the road. What are you going to tell somebody who is sitting on the edge of Flynn ward in the Latrobe Valley with compromised mental health? They are coming from outer regions in Gippsland. What are you going to tell them? 'By the way, funding might be around in 2026, 2027, 2028 or never.' These things are very important.

Also, in relation to regional mental health boards, there are interim regional boards that are supposed to be that triage – again, that service that links local community health provisions of mental health and the hospitals, the sort of acute centres. This was a recommendation from the royal commission in relation to, again, linking triage support services. When somebody exits the Wonthaggi Hospital – when they are rolling in and through and out of that hospital – they need proper support to put them back in at home, not to just come back to the hospital but to be able to have those services that are needed. It should not be up to nurses on the way out to provide that. These interim regional boards are vitally important. They are part of the recommendations of the royal commission, and yet they are going to be delayed. Then the services are delayed and the value to the population of Victorians is delayed.

In this motion before us, we see that there have been cuts to health, and part of those cuts to health is around the cuts to the cancer centre. This is a world-class centre, the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre, with world-leading advancement in cancer care. There is a 75 per cent cut. What do we see from this government over 10 years? Six hundred thousand Victorians are languishing on the urgent elective surgery waitlist. There has been a 40 per cent increase in category 1 surgery waitlists. We have seen that with planned surgery lists and the government's own benchmarks – they are dropping those. Rather than creating the services, providing that care, getting people the operation they need and getting them back out into society to lead full and reasonable lives and contribute to society, they have cut their own targets. Again, this is unacceptable, and again the government is showing that it cannot manage money, it cannot manage the health system and it certainly cannot manage people's expectations.

In terms of the fast rail loop in Geelong, it is going to be kicked down the road, as is the airport rail. I know a number of people from Gippsland who are totally frustrated with the fact that they go through the gridlock of the Monash. They had the thought of having an airport rail, which has been in the system for 20 years. This government was happy to spruik it over successive elections. Well, now it has been kicked down the table again. We also know that this government is thwarting the regional rail link rollout. It has been on the table for some eight years. In fact my dear colleague the federal member for Gippsland put the majority – 80 per cent – of the funding up for that, and indeed the government is kicking it down the road.

We heard before from Mr Galea. He talked about uplift – Labor is uplifting. What they are uplifting is debt and misery –

A member interjected.

Melina BATH: and taxes. Thank you very much.

A member interjected.

Melina BATH: They are the debt lifters. Not only that, they are the tax lifters as well – 53 new or increased taxes over the duration –

A member interjected.

Melina BATH: It is 55, apologies. That is right – now it has gone up. It is hard to keep up with the debt-ridden Labor government, and these sorts of people are affecting my region. *(Time expired)*

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Family violence reform implementation monitor

Legislative Review of Family Violence Information Sharing and Risk Management

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:15): I rise to make a statement on the *Legislative Review of Family Violence Information Sharing and Risk Management: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Parts 5A and 11 of the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic)*, which is a report from the family violence reform implementation monitor tabled in the Council on 17 August 2023. I thought it was appropriate to talk about this report today given that earlier in the week we had Rosie Batty in the Parliament talking about the launch of her book and memoir, *Hope*. This piece of legislation and this framework that was part of the government's response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence has a very close connection to Ms Batty and to the tragic death of her son Luke a decade ago.

The coroner, in his inquest into the death of Luke Batty, in one of the key recommendations in that report – recommendation 4 – recommended that the law be changed to improve the sharing of information about perpetrators of family violence to better inform risk assessment, and that was a notion that was further discussed by the royal commission in their report. Some key recommendations were made by that royal commission and resulted in the legislative change that was enacted a few years later and that the topic of this report goes to.

The reason I am so keen to talk about it with you is because when I joined the public service in 2015 responding to the coroner's report, particularly on the information sharing, and then subsequently developing a response to the family violence royal commission was one of the things that I worked on in the family violence reform unit in the Department of Premier and Cabinet. I had the great honour of working on these reforms, working with Rosie and other members of the victim-survivor advisory council to develop the legislative response that has now been implemented.

This is important also because we have had comments in the last 24 hours from the former Premier, who quite rightly and wisely said that other jurisdictions around the country could learn a lot from the reforms that Victoria enacted following our royal commission. I think this particular one is one that has demonstrated a lot of benefit and goes to the heart of how we make victim-survivors safer by effectively reducing the amount of rights, particularly the right to privacy, that perpetrators of family violence have. We are clearly preferring the rights of victim-survivors of family violence to be safe. The assessments about the risks they face from perpetrators are more important than the right to privacy that perpetrators of family violence often had used to shield information about their past that could be used to inform new partners or new service delivery agencies of the risks they pose given their violent history.

This is, I think, a key point from the royal commission:

Assessing the risk that a person will be subjected to family violence and then appropriately managing that risk, underpins all efforts to uphold safety for victims of family violence and to hold perpetrators of family violence to account.

The central principle of these legislative reforms is that you cannot hold perpetrators properly accountable unless you know the full picture, unless you know the full story, and that information about them should be shared between trusted entities who work in the family violence space, who perform family violence risk assessments, so that the full picture of these perpetrators and their previous actions is laid bare. Sadly, that was not the case with respect to orders that were made around the father of Luke Batty. As the coroner said, had that been different, the outcome of that event may well have been different as well.

This review done by the family violence reform implementation monitor says that these changes have been:

... effective in supporting a positive cultural shift away from maintaining perpetrator privacy toward sharing information to keep victim-survivors safe and to hold perpetrators accountable.

The sort of changes that Victoria implemented following the royal commission have made a difference to the way that family violence services operate. They have made victim-survivors safer. They have held perpetrators more accountable. These were and are nation-leading reforms, and we strongly suggest that others around the nation follow suit.

Gender identity

Petition

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:20): Yesterday I was proud, in fact very proud, to table petition 512, which called for an urgent, impartial, transparent, ethical, independent inquiry into gender identity services for children and adolescents and to consult with medical professionals and young people and their families who have lived experiences of the current end-to-end treatment process. 1437 Victorians supported this campaign. They stand with clinicians around the world who have defended the rights of children and minors and rejected the pressure from so-called progressive activists to base clinical practice on ideology, not sound medical science, with disastrous consequences for child welfare.

Since the petition launched in October 2023, the UK's Cass review has vindicated this position. This review conducted by former president of the royal college of paediatrics Dr Hilary Cass recommends a shift away from medical intervention for trans-identifying children, calling it an area of remarkably weak evidence, to a model that considers possible mental health issues and prioritises therapy. It stated that:

For most young people, a medical pathway will not be the best way to manage their gender-related distress.

This stands in stark contrast to the move from the Royal Children's Hospital to endorse and expand the use of gender affirmative treatment, meaning strong hormonal drugs can be prescribed to children and elective surgery may be performed on minors. The hospital has apparently reaffirmed its commitment to a narrowly focused practice, eschewing the multidisciplinary approach now increasingly advocated worldwide.

The response from some in government to the Cass review in Australia has not inspired confidence so far. They seem still to take the word of clinics that there is nothing to see here – this despite the massive increase in treatments for gender dysphoria, which must surely ring alarm bells. It is time for a neutral root-and-branch review. How can anyone oppose this with the stakes so high and with the credible evidence of a potential problem? It is shameful for those in authority to fail to even investigate the matter further – shameful.

I would like to commend the Women's Action Group, a brave pro-women movement encouraging women to speak freely about gender ideology and its impacts, and I commend them because they bravely stand up when others abuse them, attack them and pillory them. They are doing a wonderful job on behalf of women and children in this state. I greatly congratulate the Women's Action Group, who are in my electorate. I am very proud to have sponsored their petition, and I look forward to the Minister for Health's response to our request for an inquiry into gender identity services. I ask her – and I ask everyone in this place – to ignore the other political pressure that emerges everywhere, to live up to the responsibility of her office and to take a brave decision in the best interests of Victoria's children. These are children we are talking about here, children and minors who are being so badly treated by this affirmative model of care – supposedly care – for children with, supposedly, gender dysphoria. All other issues affecting their health need to be investigated properly, and they are not, because of the implications of the affirmative model that is in law in this state. I commend the petition. I commend the petitioners, and I thank them for bravely standing up for the future of children especially and minors in this state.

Gender identity

Petition

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:25): I also would like to talk on petition 512 on the inquiry into gendered identity services for young people tabled by Mrs McArthur yesterday. No child is born in the wrong body, and children cannot consent to puberty blockers or cross sex hormones. I am not saying this to shock or offend; I am saying it because it is true, and we must. Lies about gender treatments have brought us to another disaster of the kind that almost always follows when the state tries to take over the welfare of kids, but radical ideology requires a response of radical truth.

If people are offended, they need to get some perspective. They need to talk to detransitioners. They are all very unique and are very much their own people, but as well as facing complex and lifelong medical problems they are often ostracised by their former friends. But they are amongst the most courageous people I have ever met. The best and most thorough evidence-based international review has found there is no good evidence of regret rates of these treatments, but we do know that around 1100 children were recently on the waiting list for gender treatment at the Royal Children's Hospital. We can only conclude that the number of detransitioners will continue to grow.

They also need to talk to parents, and some MPs did talk to parents just last week, so there is no excuse not to take action. The state education inquiry heard from parents who were effectively lied to by teachers who hid the fact their child has been socially transitioned to the opposite gender. As well as destroying trust between parents and teachers it has destroyed trust between kids and their own parents. There is no solid evidence social transitioning is good or bad for children, but there is strong evidence it can lead to potentially catastrophic early medical interventions, and the people who destroy these families need have no higher qualification than a working with children check. As one of the parents told the inquiry, while the education department talks about diversity and inclusion, it is the parents who are left excluded and left to feel like they do not even care for their own kids. Yet we need to tell these kids the truth – that there is no good evidence that gender treatments will fix their mental health, that they are probably in this situation because they are neurodiverse, their neurodiversity will not change by taking pills or changing their bodies and that the best cure for gender dysphoria is probably puberty.

It is unlikely that anyone will tell them that the Cass review has identified major weaknesses in processes used at the Royal Children's Hospital. My message to boys who are effeminate and girls who are tomboys is: there is absolutely nothing wrong with you or your bodies. You do not need to be fixed. You are enough, and nobody cares about you more than your parents.

Trans people have rights like all of us, and their right to make choices as adults needs to be respected. They deserve respect, but nobody should be forced to deny biological reality and everyone's freedom

of association should also be respected. In the future we will remember the way children in gender distress were treated at a time of state-sponsored madness. So instead of being afraid that someone might be offended it is time for adults to stand up and tell the truth. We must speak up. We absolutely must. On this occasion let us not wait for the royal commission and emotional apologies by future premiers. Let us follow the expert advice from overseas and stop these medical treatments on children before more of them are harmed.

Swinburne University of Technology

Report 2023

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (17:28): I rise today in this place to speak on the Swinburne University of Technology 2023 annual report, and I thank the council for supplying this report and updating us on their continued strides forward to our state in higher education. Victoria has been and will continue to be the home of innovation and education, and I was delighted to see Swinburne University of Technology rise up the ranks – a significant leap forward of 100 places and into the top 250 ranked universities worldwide.

It is true to say that our government takes education seriously and we always have. It is a pillar of what makes our state a leader in technological innovation, solutions to climate challenges and energy solutions that will keep us at the forefront of the nation's climate first options. Just this December gone Swinburne University of Technology has been named as the host of a historic partnership between France and Australia – FACET, I think that is how we are saying this acronym – the French Australian Centre for Energy Transition. In this partnership it really aims to tackle climate change and strengthen the relationship between French and Australian climate and energy academics. Universities continue to take climate action and accountability for their carbon emissions, and I commend Swinburne University for dropping its carbon emissions from a very significant 44,114 tonnes of carbon per year in 2019 to 3677 in 2023. That is a total cut to overall hard gross carbon emissions by 90 per cent through the purchase of renewable electricity and carbon offsets.

Academic institutions know that the future of energy is renewables. It is sustainable and it is fundamental to ensuring that scientific inquiry and innovation can continue to thrive over the long term without depleting or damaging our resources or the communities that rely on them. This involves fostering some practices that will not only minimise environmental impact but also promote economic viability and social equity. In 2024 Swinburne will continue participation in a public disclosure and certification program for organisational carbon neutrality, aiming to adopt these measures before 2025. They have partnered with, I think, Twynam Earth Fund to celebrate the real-world impact of its decarbonisation research. This collaboration aims to develop new ventures and marketable solutions by combining academic expertise with the fund's focus on investing in climate-reducing technologies and supporting transformative climate companies globally.

Onto other institutions, I would like to take a moment to commend Latrobe University in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region for funding and constructing the largest urban solar farm in their transition to net zero emissions by 2029 and welcome other universities and businesses to follow their lead in renewable technological investment. This solar farm will eliminate the equivalent emissions of the entire suburb of Kingsbury, which is a great achievement. Victorians continue to find solutions to climate, social, economic and other issues through our work with our educational leaders, supported of course by our government, and I hope that through this we can foster the minds of the future to continue to lead the country in our resilience and innovation. The future of energy here in our state is renewable, and I commend the university for collaborating in technological innovation for climate action.

Department of the Legislative Council

Report 2022–23

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:32): My statement on reports is on the Legislative Council annual report 2022–23. There are many great features of this place. Having been

in this place since November 2022 there are statements on reports, there is question time, there are constituency questions, there are adjournments and there are petitions. But one of the features of this place that I really value is the reading of the Lord's Prayer every day, and I actually wanted to acknowledge in this place and take the time to speak about a very significant joint letter we all received as members of Parliament from the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, the Board of Imams Victoria, the Hindu Council of Australia and the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, who actually minister and care for more than 2 million Victorians in their communities.

Since 1857 the Lord's Prayer has been a longstanding and formal part of both houses of the Victorian Parliament. The recitation of the prayer is a common tradition of the Westminster system and together with the acknowledgement of country every day provides a vital link between two very important facets of our history. The Lord's Prayer is an action and public acknowledgement of responsible service to the people of Victoria. Multifaith communities play a very important role in our multicultural society. Any move to secularise parliamentary proceedings would send a clear message to the Victorian people from the Parliament that faith has no place in Victoria, and I think it would be a very sad day. I am not opposed to people boycotting the prayer in this place, and often those that do are those who preach about tolerance of others. I do not think you could be any more intolerant of faith communities in Victoria than if you sought to remove faith from this place. This Parliament would be sending a message to faith communities that they have no place in this state.

Leadership starts at the top – at the top and in this place in Parliament as leaders and elected representatives of our community. To send a message that faith has no place would be wrong. We need to send a message that Victoria is a multicultural state and a multifaith state, and there is no turning back from that. Actually, instead of ignoring that or boycotting that or cancelling it or abolishing it, we embrace multifaith communities, we put our arms around multifaith communities and send a message that together, with the acknowledgement of country, we acknowledge and pay respect to great institutions in our society. We believe the reading of the Lord's Prayer is consistent with Victoria's diverse community in recognising the roots of our Westminster system and acknowledging this community, and it continues to demonstrate we actually live in a tolerant society.

As a practising Catholic, I acknowledge that the Lord's Prayer every day is not actually a Catholic one, but I still recognise and partake in it because it is very important to the people of Victoria. Leadership starts with our leaders and leaders in our community. We are elected to serve our communities, particularly faith communities. Replacing it with a secular reflection and secularising the Parliament would send a clear message that faith has no place in our community. Other people in this chamber and political activists would be the first to preach tolerance with our multicultural communities. I ask you to read closely the joint letter from the Board of Imams, from the Hindu Council of Australia, from the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, from the Catholic Diocese of Melbourne, from the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, because it is a really, really important one. It is a simple prayer held across traditions, and it is a call for our community to honour God so as to love and serve others before ourselves. To serve others before ourselves is what we are here to do – it is exactly what we are here to do – and acknowledgement of the prayer each day is a message that we are here to serve others before ourselves. We should retain the Lord's Prayer, and the Liberals and Nationals will be fighting every day to oppose any attempt to replace the Lord's Prayer with some sort of secular reflection.

Gender identity

Petition

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (17:37): It is my pleasure to rise and also speak on petition 512 from my colleague Mrs McArthur. I just wanted to say also a big thankyou to the many, many people out there like – I was going to say Bev, but I am not allowed to call you that – my colleague Mrs McArthur. She and many others, like Mr Limbrick here, in the initial stages of this

whole transgender affirmation ideology that is sweeping around the world – many of us just thought that it was a natural extension of the civil rights movements by the LGB communities. When it started to turn out that that was not the case, people like these two and many others had the courage to pause and raise the alarm, especially when it came to minors, especially when the evidence started stacking up and proving that transgender affirmation on minors is unethical. It has no proper evidentiary basis, it is harmful to them, and it needs to stop.

I will not add to the many wonderful points that these two have made, other than that it is an absolute atrocity that the loving instincts of parents, the safeguarding instincts of carers like teachers, the ethical standards of clinicians and the reasonable rights of MPs to stand on the Parliament House front steps and talk about women's rights without being smeared as far-right Nazis – it is an absolute atrocity that all of this was done to divert attention from the fact that this has been a massive mistake. All of the resistance to this movement is based on genuine care, or at least the vast majority of it – there are probably bigots out there. I heard today what happened to you, Aiv. It is a disgraceful way that you have been treated – absolutely disgraceful. But you are not the only person who has been treated like that. I have been maligned and mistreated unfairly for things that I have never said and never believed. Everybody can go too far in these things. The Labor government, who I grew up with as part of that whole community – you have made a mistake, and children are getting hurt. We do not need an inquiry, Bev; it has already been done. We need to stop hurting these children. They cannot consent to losing their sexual function. They cannot consent to losing their fertility. The pipeline from school curriculums to these gender clinics needs to be abolished. We have to stop this political careerism, and we have got to look after children. Everyone cares about them, but the evidence is out. Trans affirmation of minors is unethical, and it needs to stop. We need to stop calling people transphobic who point out the inconsistencies in transgender ideology and the conflicts of interest between the 'LGB' and the 'TQ+'.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2024–25

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:40): I am wanting to make a statement today about the budget and particularly the energy output within the budget, which has fallen by 31 per cent in its funding this year and by 10 per cent on a budget-to-budget linkage. But clearly there is a serious problem in the approach that the current government is adopting with respect to its budgeting in the energy portfolio, and that is not all. I should say that this week we have seen Victoria increasingly pointed to as the outlier in the national approach that is being adopted by the Commonwealth government. The *Future Gas Strategy* dated May 2024, released in recent days, makes it very clear that Victoria is at odds with the Commonwealth. It makes it clear that Victoria, with its harsh ideological war on so-called fossil gas and its direct attempt to ban gas in Victoria, is completely and utterly out of step with the Commonwealth. Victoria has already banned gas connections on new estates. It has already banned any rebates on appliances. It has made those steps as part of its plan to block and unwind gas connections in this state.

Gas of course has a very important role not just in this state with respect to the importance of homes and businesses, and in so many businesses gas is not just a feedstock. It is an energy source, and we are about to lose a very important manufacturing group like Qenos. We have lost Seeley. All of those firms are now being hit because the government has not understood that we need gas both as a feedstock and, importantly, as an energy source. But this government in Victoria under Lily D'Ambrosio's leadership in the energy portfolio is wanting to go much further, and the gas plan put out by the federal government is flawed in certain respects but hitting very many key points that need to be considered. It admits that we need an import terminal or import terminals. It means that there is not enough gas. The amount of run-down from Bass Strait is significant, and we need not just an import terminal but, importantly, gas exploration and onshore conventional gas drilling to actually augment our supplies urgently. The government has banned access to this for 10 years. It is now in a scramble to try and deal with this.

But it is when it comes to homes that the difference is most sharp. It is in the case of homes where the difference is most clear, and the hardline, almost Stalinist approach adopted by Ms D'Ambrosio – no gas connections on new estates, no new appliances – is completely at odds with principle 4 in the Commonwealth document, which says:

Households will continue to have a choice over how their energy needs are met.

There is a clear recognition in the Commonwealth document that removing gas may not be possible in certain circumstances and that some houses will not easily be converted to electricity. Also this state government has completely lost the plot when it comes to the costs. We have seen costs surge up and up and up for both gas and electricity in this state, 28 per cent up in terms of electricity last year according to St Vincent de Paul, and the same survey shows a 22 per cent increase in gas prices for households and similar large increases for small businesses.

All of these increases are completely hurting families very significantly at a time of a cost-of-living crisis. Families, often those with the least capacity to pay, are being hit very hard and very harshly. We know the government's approach is in chaos. We know the minister has lost control of the portfolio with the approach she has adopted with offshore wind, and she is now desperately calling for new Commonwealth money because she knows she is not going to be able to easily backfill on offshore wind. It is worse than that, though, isn't it, when you understand what is going on here? There is a group of those quangos, national bodies, that have got enormous power and enormous control. They are out of control, and they do not have the interests of Victorians and Australians at heart. They are actually not accountable to a Parliament. They are not accountable to the people. Cost, reliability and environmental outcomes have got to be a key focus, and I have to say that cost, accountability and outcomes have not been the focus of this government. (*Time expired*)

Albury Wodonga Health

Production of documents

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:46): I rise to speak on a document that was tabled in Echuca at the regional sitting, and that was a response from the Attorney-General about the documents motion that I moved on 6 March asking for documents relating to Albury Wodonga Health. That documents motion moved by this house on 6 March was passed unanimously by this house, including by the government. The government were due to reply to that within three weeks of their having passed that motion, so that set 27 March as the date by which the government should have responded and supplied those documents to the Legislative Council. That 27 March date came and went, and then on 18 April, six weeks after the motion was passed and three weeks beyond the deadline for the production of the documents, the Attorney-General tabled a letter saying that the government had not had enough time to produce those documents and needed more time. Well, here we are now on 15 May, 10 weeks after the motion was passed and seven weeks after the due date, and still we have nothing from the government – nothing at all. It has been 10 weeks, and they have not been able to produce those documents that were demanded by this house. This is an insult to the Parliament. It completely disregards the will of the Parliament, and the government need to be transparent on this. We know that these documents can be responded to rather quickly, because the New South Wales government did produce a similar set of documents within three weeks when the Legislative Council in New South Wales demanded those documents, but this government and the secretive state that we have here in Victoria will not produce the documents.

Albury Wodonga Health is an important health service in this state. It is a unique service because it is a cross-border service. It services a regional catchment area of around 300,000 people, and it has an increasing demand for services in that area. On Friday 1 March Ms Crozier, Mrs Broad and I attended a health summit in Albury–Wodonga, and there were representatives there from the federal government, from the federal Parliament, from the New South Wales government and from the New South Wales opposition of the New South Wales Parliament. There were representatives from the

Liberal and Nationals parties, but not one person from the Victorian government could even turn up and give that community the time of day.

The community there want a new hospital. They want it on a greenfield site, and this is what they were originally promised. But then there was this new master plan released that said that they would now have a refurbishment of the Albury site for the hospital location. There was a big announcement by the New South Wales and Victorian governments about funding for that, but now it appears that that project too has stalled. It appears that the government here in Victoria is walking away from a commitment to the Albury and Wodonga community. This is an important Victorian health service. It is a Victorian health service – as I said, it is unique because it is cross-border, but it is a service that is actually provided by the Victorian government. It is vastly important that we have transparency around this project for the people of Albury and Wodonga so that they understand what their health service will look like as it goes forward and whether they will get this investment from the two governments into a new hospital in Albury–Wodonga. I would urge the government to get on with whatever they are doing to identify these documents and to supply them to the Legislative Council by the next time that we meet.

The PRESIDENT: That ends statements on tabled papers and petitions. It just came to my attention that Mr Mulholland made a statement on a paper that has not been tabled. I remind people that statements need to be made on reports that have been tabled.

Petitions

Middle East conflict

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (17:51): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

Today is Nakba Day, a day that recognises the mass displacement of the Palestinian people in 1948. It is also seven months since Israel invaded Gaza, leading to another mass displacement of Palestinian people. In that time over 100,000 Palestinian people have been killed or injured by Israeli military forces. Seventy per cent of the victims of Israel's war have been women and children. Children are starving to death as Israel blockades aid and is creating a famine. As we speak, the 1.2 million Palestinians sheltering in Rafah are being told to evacuate as Israel starts bombing the city, despite there being nowhere safe to go. The world is witnessing a genocide.

Seven months ago this place passed a motion saying it stood with Israel after the horrendous attacks by Hamas, but neither this place nor the other place nor the Premier have rescinded or offered another motion in its place recognising the atrocities committed by Israel in its invasion of Gaza. Since then the Premier has called for calm in the community but has not condemned the actions of Israel. Moreover, she has defended her government's agreements with Elbit Systems and the Israeli Ministry of Defense. Elbit Systems is Israel's largest weapons manufacturer. Its weapons have been killing and injuring Palestinians and destroying their homes, their workplaces, their hospitals, their universities, their water supplies, the very things of life the rest of us take for granted. By defending and continuing these agreements Victorian Labor is providing cover to Israel. Agreements such as these provide a legitimacy to the parties involved – in this case, Elbit Systems and the Israeli government. Labor is giving Elbit the seal of approval and offering support to the Israeli government with these agreements.

Atrocities happen when those responsible think there will be no consequences. Benjamin Netanyahu and his government are defying the world community, and we must all do what we can to send the message that having zero regard for civilian lives and international law has consequences. With even Joe Biden considering suspending weapons shipments, Labor's continued refusal to take any actions against Benjamin Netanyahu's extreme war cabinet is inexcusable cowardice. Enough is enough. It is time for Labor to move beyond words and take action. The federal Labor government should be imposing sanctions and expelling the Israeli ambassador.

Here in Victoria the very least that should happen – the very least – is for Labor to end its agreements with Elbit Systems and the Israeli Ministry of Defense. That is what the petitioners are asking for today with this petition brought before this house. Labor, you really seem not to be willing to understand what is being asked of you in this moment. You keep telling us to stop talking about Gaza, stop talking about the conflict, stop causing conflict, stop wearing our keffiyehs, stop making you feel uncomfortable, and you accuse us of making up facts, all in an attempt to deflect and avoid taking responsibility and showing moral courage.

In contrast to the Premier and Labor, the community here in Victoria have been showing up week after week to demonstrate their horror at Israel's actions and call for peace, and hundreds of them are joined right now outside this Parliament once again calling for peace and calling for this government to act. We have seen week after week, for months on end, thousands of Victorians joining with millions across the world in this moment for peace.

The Greens have been accused by Labor and the Liberals of stoking division and undermining social cohesion in the community when we talk about what is happening in Palestine. There is a power dynamic in these calls for social cohesion that most in this place are oblivious to. It seems that it is governments and politicians who get to decide what is or is not social cohesion. The communities affected get no say. In fact when they do ask for something from the government, like to end its relationship with a defence company whose weapons are being used to kill people like them, they are accused of division. Professor Andrew Jakubowicz puts it this way:

If people are creating problems for me, there's an issue with social cohesion. If the minorities are making me feel uncomfortable, then there's a problem of social cohesion. If the government ...are making the minorities community uncomfortable, it is their problem.

What I can say with absolute clarity is that ignoring communities when they are distressed and ignoring communities calling for action in the face of the atrocities the world is witnessing in Gaza will not help build social cohesion. You know what will help build social cohesion? Stopping the onslaught and the slaughter of the people in Gaza. You know what will help build social cohesion? Stopping the genocide. You know what will help build social cohesion? Peace, doing everything we possibly can – and we can do things in this place – to achieve peace and liberate the Palestinian people. Free, free Palestine!

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:56): I rise to speak to the petition that has been outlined by Dr Ratnam. I know that she and certain others are passionate about this issue. We understand that there is this terrible conflict that is occurring in the Middle East, which sadly could have been avoided if 7 October did not take place. I think it is also very concerning that over 100 or 130 hostages still remain captured by Hamas, those terrorists that conducted the most appalling atrocity on 7 October – the murdering, the torture, the rape of innocent men, women and children. That cannot be forgotten. It must not be forgotten.

There are many people that are absolutely despairing about the situation, and nobody wants this conflict to continue – nobody. But this petition is calling on the government's partnership with Elbit Systems, which is an Israeli company. I just want to put some comments on the record in relation to that. I have heard from government members earlier today who spoke about the misinformation around this particular company and what is being conducted here in Victoria. This really is a global company, and Australia gets far more benefit from our defence relationship with Israel than Israel does from us in relation to this technology that Elbit is doing. It is not what I think the Greens and others are saying, as was highlighted by the government MPs this morning.

When the Parliament did make that statement about 7 October, the Parliament did stand as one because of the horrific nature of what went on. I realise that there is a huge issue that has gone on, and we know that since then antisemitism has increased by more than 700 per cent. What we have seen is a very divisive debate that has gone on in our community. There is hate-filled speech. It is divisive, and it is unnecessary. Nobody wants this in our state or in our country. We do not need this. You see the scenes

at so many institutions that would undertake peaceful protest, but there is an anxiety there and there is the fact that Jewish students do not feel safe. I know that from personal experience in terms of dealing with some of these young people who are very concerned about what is going on. They just want to get on and live their lives and be safe. They have got no control over what is happening in the Middle East, but many of them do, sadly, know many people that were caught up in the horrific atrocities of 7 October.

Hamas is a terrorist organisation. It has absolutely no regard for what is occurring, and I think we have to recognise that. Unfortunately their actions have gone on and on and on, and we still have hostages that have not been returned home to their loved ones in Israel after those horrific atrocities, as I said, on 7 October.

There are many reports about what has been taking place at an international level. Nobody in this chamber has the details of what is going on. We have to rely on news reports, and I do think there are issues around some of the information that is getting out and some of the emails and the ridiculous statements that I am receiving from people who are not taking into account the true state of what occurred on 7 October. I find it insulting that there is that lack of regard.

I know there are people out there who want this conflict to end. We all do. But this petition, which is I think inflaming those tensions within our community, is unfortunate, and that is a consideration that I think everybody needs to take in. When we are talking about this we do not want to put fuel on the fire and inflame this any more than it is. There is too much at stake. We were out there today talking about respectful hate speech, and we were being howled down – (*Time expired*)

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:02): I rise to speak in support of this petition tabled by my friends in the Greens today. I stood in this place in March calling for this government to finally end its partnership with Israeli weapons companies in light of the planned invasion of Rafah, but today bombs are being dropped on 1.4 million people, nearly half of them children. They are currently sheltering in Rafah after being told to evacuate to there for safety.

While using the very weapons this government supports, Israeli military spokespeople have made claims such as ‘the emphasis is on damage and not on accuracy’, ‘the only thing that needs to enter Gaza are hundreds of tons of explosives not an ounce of aid’ and ‘there will be no electricity, no food, no fuel’. Throughout this same period I have been in communication with two Palestinian families after supporting their visa applications to Australia. Muhannad, Razan, Millar Mohammad, Mai and Maha put everything they had put everything that they had into subclass 600 visa applications as they attempted to flee to Australia. Due to Israel’s ongoing bombardment, baby Millar, who was born on 5 October, was unable to even obtain a birth certificate, only a hospital discharge paper. I learned last week that they had their applications rejected because they do not have stable employment. How can the government expect Gazans to have stable employment in a city where over 72 per cent of schools and 100 per cent of universities are gone, where hospitals do not operate and where homes are tents?

Muhannad was surprised that I was willing to even share his story in this place. He did not believe that anyone here was committed to helping him and his family. That is something that we should all be deeply ashamed of. He said in a message to me:

Unfortunately I don’t know what to say, because there were hopes and in a moment all hopes collapsed in a row.

With no way out of Gaza, the only hope for Muhannad and his family is a ceasefire. His only hope is compassion, and we should be offering it.

I share this story because at the very same time that the Australian government sends aid to Palestinians it is shipping weapons to their killers. In this place we are told there is little that we can do as state MPs, and that is just not true. What we do have is a platform, and with that comes a responsibility to use it. When this is taught in history books in years to come, we will be known as the decision-makers

of this time, and I am proud to stand with many of my crossbench colleagues and the thousands who signed this petition on the right side of history this evening. Free Palestine!

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:06): I am saddened to have to get up and make a commentary on this particular petition. The petition is to end a partnership with Elbit Systems. It has been signed by a significant number of people. But this is part of an attack on the Jewish community and is part of a racist approach, in my humble view. It is an appalling and unbalanced petition that has not understood that legitimate connections between the Victorian community, the Victorian government and the Israeli community, the Israeli government and Israeli firms are entirely reasonable and entirely in the spirit in which things should be conducted.

Actually, the truth of the matter is that this is part of a broader, nasty campaign to attack Israel, to attack Jewish people and to make it as difficult as possible for them. We see this with our campuses on fire tonight, with the occupation of buildings, and we saw it out on the front steps today: a number of MPs of all political backgrounds were out there talking to the media, and yet the pro-Palestinian groups out there moved over in a menacing way. They were quite clear, they were shouting out and making an attempt to drown out the MPs speaking to the TV cameras. It was a clear attempt at bullying; let us call it for what it was. That is what occurred on the steps of Parliament or just off the steps of Parliament in the period after 1 o'clock. It was an aggressive demonstration, in fact, and showed their true colours.

This calling out loudly 'From the river to the sea,' that is a clear attempt to look at the end of Israel, to push Israel out, and I see that Israel is under an existential threat. They are entitled to arm themselves; they are entitled to protect their people. What could be more significant than what we saw on 7 October with 1200 people killed, mass rapes, true terror unleashed by the Hamas group just over the border into Israel. It is clear that this was an attempt to intimidate the Israeli community, it is clear, old-fashioned terrorism in the sense of trying to use the power of threats, the power of attack, the power of making people fearful and uncertain. The idea that you would hurt babies, the idea that you would rape women on the scale that we saw – and there are still hundreds of hostages held by Hamas today. Why are we not calling for the release of those Hamas hostages? Why is not every one of those hostages being released? I cannot understand why people have not understood that Hamas is a terrorist organisation. Associating with Hamas is a shocking outcome.

Look, I make the point here that nobody can misunderstand that there are so many people being caught up in this in Gaza. People who, through no fault of their own, are actually being caught up in what is a terrible war that is occurring – let us call it for what it is. I do not blame Israel, though, for wanting to deal with, degrade, diminish and ultimately destroy Hamas. I think that is entirely reasonable. If another country came to Australia, killed 1200 people in Victoria and kidnapped hundreds of people in Victoria, raped people, attacked babies, dragged corpses around in the way that we saw on that shocking footage – if that happened in Victoria – Victorians would demand that the government, Australians would demand that the government actually respond and deal with the group that had delivered that terrible and unjustified outcome. That is the truth of the matter. Victorians would demand that, Australians would demand that, and that is what the Israeli government is trying to do at the moment. Hamas has embedded itself right across Gaza, and I make the point that Gazans and Palestinians are not the same as Hamas. I do make that point very strongly. But they have allowed this to occur. It is true that the Gazans did vote for Hamas in 2006 or thereabouts – (*Time expired*)

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (18:11): Unlike Mr Davis and Ms Crozier, I would actually like to talk about Elbit Systems and its relationship with the government. I know it is a wild and crazy notion to talk to the subject of the petition, but what the hell. People are doubtless aware of the words of Shakespeare:

Cry 'havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war ...

It was Mark Antony's bloodthirsty rally. It is fair to say that the dogs of war are having their day, roaming unconstrained and causing havoc across the planet. But who gives those dogs of war their

fangs? Who quietly feeds the hundreds of dirty wars being waged around the world? Who profits from the horrific carnage we see daily? It is the merchants of war, and Elbit Systems is one of them. Elbit are the makers of such hideous and prohibited weapons as artillery shells and bombs containing white phosphorus, designed to burn human flesh off the bone; fléchette projectiles, designed not simply to penetrate the body but to pass through it; and cluster munitions, small bomblets that litter the ground and kill civilians sometimes years after hostilities have ceased – horrific weapons that cause unspeakable damage to civilian populations. So horrific are they that the board of Australia's Future Fund, our sovereign wealth fund, chaired by that notorious peacenik and former Liberal Treasurer Peter Costello, deemed Elbit to be an excluded investment. Elbit were placed on an exclusion list by Future Fund because of their unethical behaviour, and that occurred only months after the then Andrews Labor government revealed that it had formed a partnership with Elbit Systems.

Elbit has long been involved in the Israeli suppression of Palestinians, even before the current conflict. Its surveillance systems and drones are used to block the movement of Palestinians between Jerusalem and the West Bank, and now we see Elbit-manufactured drones and smart bombs used to massacre the Palestinians trapped in Gaza. As this petition notes, their drones were used in the murder of Australian Zomi Frankcom and the six other World Central Kitchen aid workers. The death toll in Gaza has reached 33,000 Palestinians, and over 72,000 have been injured. This is the work of the Israel Defense Forces. The UN Human Rights Council – another Bolshevik organisation – reporting on the unrelenting assault on Gaza, found that there were grounds to indicate that the crime of genocide was being perpetrated by the IDF on the people of Gaza. That genocide is being realised through the handiwork of firms such as Elbit Systems.

Ms Crozier says we get more from Elbit. Well, can I say the major acquisition from Elbit was their defence system, which our federal government cancelled this year. They are one of the companies responsible for the burnt, mutilated Palestinian civilians we see nightly on our TV screens. The Victorian government's partnership with Elbit Systems –

Georgie Crozier: What about those poor Israelis that are still hostages?

David ETTERS HANK: This is not about the – anyway, we will come back to that one. The Victorian government's partnership with Elbit Systems, investments –

Members interjecting.

David ETTERS HANK: Yes, thank you for that. The Victorian government's partnership with Elbit Systems, investments made on behalf of the Victorian people, implicates us all in these war crimes. So we simply ask: what is the Victorian government doing on our behalf? Why is Victoria in partnership with a company like Elbit? We have no idea what this partnership entails. Where is the transparency? Why must the details of this partnership be kept secret from the people of Victoria? Is this the sort of company Victoria wants to invest in? As signatories to the UN genocide convention, we have a responsibility to prevent genocide, and we as parliamentarians have an obligation to speak about that. And let us be clear: this is not an attack on the people of Israel. This is not an attack based on antisemitism. We support a peaceful resolution between Israel and Palestine and a sustainable two-party solution.

Legalise Cannabis Victoria wholeheartedly supports this petition. We call on the Victorian government to end its partnership with Elbit Systems and to publish its memorandum of understanding with the Israeli Ministry of Defense. The Victorian government should not be a party to nurturing the insatiable dogs of war and enriching their merchants.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:16): We are here to talk about Elbit Systems. For those that do not know or perhaps have not gathered already from this debate here today, Elbit Systems is a weapons manufacturer, and it is a huge part of the war machine that is being used by the Israeli government to destroy Gaza and kill tens of thousands of Palestinian people. Their weapons are reducing family homes and businesses to rubble and killing children in ways so cruel I cannot even

speak them out loud, and this Victorian Labor government has a partnership with Elbit, which they signed in 2021, as well as a memorandum of understanding with the Israeli defence ministry – that same military that are currently rolling through Rafah, murdering Palestinians and decimating Gaza from top to bottom and back again. Yet we see in this debate today no government speakers, no speakers from the Labor Party. To that I say: own up to your actions. Own up to the work that you do. Own up to your policy. You are in government. At least field a speaker here today to answer up to this. Own up to it. We do not know as a chamber here yet the exact details of Labor's relationship with Elbit or of the memorandum of understanding. They have so far been kept as secret deals under this Labor government, and frankly, the fact that these exist at all is a problem.

But I am standing here on behalf of the community, the more than 2000 people who signed this petition to demand that Labor end its relationship with this abhorrent company that is complicit in the genocide in Gaza that is occurring right now and that they cut ties with the Israeli defence ministry, who are committing these acts. Out on the steps right now people are voicing their disgust at Labor's failure to step up in this time of genocide. People have been showing up on the streets of Melbourne and in cities around the world every weekend for months and months now, calling for a ceasefire, calling for peace, for an end to the slaughter of Palestinians. Students from our universities have formed encampments. I visited Monash just the other day. I actually spent quite a lovely few hours sharing a meal – peaceful – painting signs and chatting to students who have been facing some frankly very scary attacks on their camp and, to put it mildly, bureaucratic challenges from the university leadership. Teachers and parents have formed coalitions to ensure that Palestinian history and culture can be taught and to stop weapons manufacturers making their way into our schools through STEM program sponsorship. School students have left class to protest. So many in the community are saying enough – enough.

It is Nakba Day today, 76 years since Israel was created on Palestinian land, and all around our state people are taking action today. They are using their voices to call for an end to this second Nakba, an end to the horror and the bloodshed in Gaza, and freedom for Palestinian people. Labor, being in government, needs to do everything that it can to be on the right side of history with this unfolding tragedy in Gaza. They need to sever ties immediately with Elbit Systems and the Israeli defence ministry. They need to speak up to their federal counterparts, to the international community, to whoever they can, with the power that they have and call for an end to the Israeli government's devastation of Gaza. Every day of silence is another day of being complicit in genocide. Free Palestine! Free Palestine! Free Palestine!

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (18:20): I want to thank my colleagues on the progressive crossbench for their contributions to this discussion and debate today. Mostly I want to thank the over 2000 Victorians – and there would have been more if the petition had been open for longer – for signing this petition asking the Victorian Labor government to do the bare minimum and end its relationships with the companies that are manufacturing weapons that are killing women and children, thousands upon thousands of Palestinians, in Gaza right now.

For those who have been watching, because the public are not allowed in the gallery at this moment, I need to tell you what has been happening in this chamber, and that is that the Labor government refused to put up a speaker for this discussion and refused to take any accountability or responsibility or defend the indefensible. In fact they have tried their best to minimise the number of people from their side of the chamber who are in the chamber. One or two people were barely here for the entirety of this discussion. It demonstrates their absolute cowardice and the moral vacuum that is the modern-day Labor Party.

These are the same MPs that turn up to events in the community with our multicultural community pretending to understand the struggles of our culturally diverse population in Victoria. But you do not, because if you did, you would do everything you possibly could, and there are things you can do, to end this assault on the Palestinian people and to find and create peace. Please do not come to our events anymore. Do not come to us and ask for photo opportunities. Do not tell us you understand our history, because for anyone who has experienced war – when the bombs dropped and the attackers came and

no-one came to our rescue, we wondered what the world was doing. Do you know what the world was doing? They were running away, like we have seen in this chamber today, and that is what the Palestinian people and millions across the world are seeing right now.

In parliaments like this across the world people are burying their heads in the sand, pretending that they cannot take responsibility and there is nothing they can do. Well, your silence matters, and our culturally diverse populations – our Palestinian communities, our Muslim communities right across this country – see you for what you are, Labor. Cowards! You have abandoned them at their time of greatest need, and they will never forgive you. This is a betrayal of everything that they had hoped for. Never again will they ever trust you.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (7): Katherine Copsey, David Ettershank, Sarah Mansfield, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam

Noes (29): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaelyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Motion negatived.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, I wonder if you might be able to inform me and the house as to whether a member is able to call a division when their party has not had a speaker in the debate.

The PRESIDENT: I do not think it is compulsory to have a contribution in a debate for someone to call a division.

Before I do the messages, I owe Mr Mulholland an apology. I had been alerted that your statement on reports was on a paper that had not been tabled. I was wrong. You were actually speaking on a Legislative Council report, so I apologise. I am happy to correct the record, and that particular report was very relevant to the contribution.

Rulings from the Chair

Broadcast of proceedings

The PRESIDENT (18:31): I know, because I have not been the President the whole time I have been here, that members do not always read exciting documents like the *Legislative Council Broadcasting Terms and Conditions*, and I appreciate that, but I am going to point out to members that there is a dot point that says:

Members should not stream or publish the IPTV feed.

I am going to investigate whether that has been done – and I believe it is not a member of this chamber, because I think members of this chamber are all here. If I find out it is a passholder aligned with someone, I do not think they are going to hold their pass for a while. I will send letters to people and investigate and see if someone is prepared to offer up who did that.

Lizzie Blandthorn: On a point of order, President, I am not sure if it is relevant to what you are saying, but I just would also ask that maybe we have a conversation offline in relation to the poster which had my photo and photos of other members of the government on it in relation to the petition that was just debated and broadcast live. If we could perhaps take that offline, I could provide that to you.

The PRESIDENT: If you could provide that to me offline, I would appreciate it.

Bev McArthur: On a point of order, President, I have not been here an exceptionally long time, but in the time I have been here I have not been witness to abuse being levelled at members of this chamber during a vote, like I just heard previously. Is that in order, or should that be ruled out of order?

The PRESIDENT: It is not in order, but I have been here quite a while, and there have been some agitated exchanges during the counting of votes, so I would not say it is unique. Preferably it does not happen, but sometimes passions spill over.

Bills

National Energy Retail Law (Victoria) Bill 2024

Council's amendments

The PRESIDENT (18:33): I will read a message from the Assembly on the National Energy Retail Law (Victoria) Bill 2024:

The Legislative Assembly informs the Legislative Council that, in relation to 'A Bill for an Act to apply as laws of Victoria, and subject to any necessary modifications prescribed under regulations, the provisions of the National Energy Retail Law providing for retailer of last resort arrangements and the other provisions of that Law that support the effective operation of those provisions, to make related amendments to the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** and the **Gas Industry Act 2001** and to make other minor technical amendments to the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** and the **Gas Industry Act 2001** to improve their operation and for other purposes' the amendments made by the Council have been agreed to.

State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (18:34): I have a message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Duties Act 2000**, the **Environment Protection Act 2017**, the **Gambling Taxation Act 2023**, the **Land Tax Act 2005**, the **Payroll Tax Act 2007**, the **Planning and Environment Act 1987**, the **State Taxation Acts and Other Acts Amendment Act 2023**, the **Taxation Administration Act 1997** and the **Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972** and for other purposes'.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (18:35): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Harriet SHING: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (18:35): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Charter)*, I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024.

In my opinion, the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024 (**Bill**), as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this Statement.

Overview

The Bill makes a number of amendments to the *Duties Act 2000*, the *Gambling Taxation Act 2023* (**Gambling Taxation Act**), *Land Tax Act 2005* (**Land Tax Act**), the *Payroll Tax Act 2007*, the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*, the *Taxation Administration Act 1997* (**TA Act**), the *Environment Protection Act 2017* (**Environment Protection Act**) and the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972*.

Many provisions of the Bill do not engage the human rights listed in the Charter because they either do not affect natural persons, or they operate beneficially in relation to natural persons.

Human rights issues

The rights under the Charter that are relevant to the Bill are the right to privacy and the presumption of innocence.

Right to privacy: section 13

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides that every person has the right to enjoy their private life, free from interference. This right applies to the collection of personal information by public authorities. An unlawful or arbitrary interference to an individual's privacy will limit this right.

Social or emergency housing exemption: Land Tax Act

Clause 12 of the Bill introduces sections 78B and 78C into the Land Tax Act which relevantly provide that in order to obtain a land tax exemption in relation to social or emergency housing, the owner of the land must apply to the Commissioner for the exemption and provide the Commissioner with any information the Commissioner requests for the purpose of enabling the Commissioner to determine whether the land is exempt.

To the extent that the collection of any personal information from a natural person in relation to these land tax exemption applications may result in interference with a natural person's privacy, any such interference will be lawful and not arbitrary as these provisions do not require that a person's personal information be published.

Further, these provisions only require the provision of information necessary to achieve the purpose of determining eligibility for the land tax exemption which is exclusively in the taxpayer's possession. Therefore, there are no other reasonable means available to achieve this purpose.

Presumption of innocence: section 25(1)

The right in section 25(1) is engaged where a statutory provision shifts the burden of proof onto an accused in a criminal proceeding, so that the accused is required to prove matters to establish, or raise evidence to suggest, that the accused person is not guilty of an offence.

Gambling Taxation Act amendment and TA Act failure to exercise due diligence

Clause 5 of the Bill inserts new section 14A into the Gambling Taxation Act which requires a casino operator to provide specified information requested by the Commissioner within a specified timeframe. Clause 23 of the Bill amends section 130B of the TA Act to specify that if a body corporate commits an offence against new section 14A of the Gambling Taxation Act, an officer of the body corporate also commits an offence against that provision if the officer failed to exercise due diligence to prevent the commission of the offence by the body corporate.

Although this provision requires a defendant to raise evidence of a matter to rely on a defence, it imposes an evidential, rather than legal burden.

Courts in other jurisdictions have generally taken the approach that an evidential onus on a defendant to raise a defence does not limit the presumption of innocence. The defences and excuses provided relate to matters within the knowledge of the defendant, which is appropriate in circumstances where placing the onus on the prosecution would involve the proof of a negative which would be very difficult. Therefore, this amendment is compatible with the right to the presumption of innocence protected by the Charter.

Conclusion

For these reasons, in my opinion, the provisions of the Bill are compatible with the rights contained in sections 13 and 25(1) of the Charter.

Hon Jaclyn Symes MP
Attorney-General
Minister for Emergency Services

Second reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (18:35): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

It is with pleasure that I introduce this Bill to deliver a number of *2024–25 Budget* initiatives. The Bill also amends several state taxation laws to support fair and effective revenue management for all Victorians.

The Bill contains amendments to the *Duties Act 2000*, the *Environment Protection Act 2017*, the *Gambling Taxation Act 2023*, the *Land Tax Act 2005*, the *Payroll Tax Act 2007*, the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*, the *State Taxation Acts and Other Acts Amendment Act 2023*, the *Taxation Administration Act 1997* and the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972* to ensure their consistent operation.

Budget measuresLand tax exemption for social and emergency housing

In line with the *2024–25 Budget* announcement, the Bill amends the *Land Tax Act 2005* to introduce a social and emergency housing exemption. Existing land tax exemptions, such as those for public statutory authorities and charities, cover many types of social and emergency housing but not all situations are exempt. The new exemption covers social housing or emergency housing owned directly by an appropriate housing provider, as well as privately-owned housing where the owner has engaged a provider to manage the property. Vacant land declared for future use as social and emergency housing by a charity will also be exempt. The exemption reflects the diverse range of delivery models in use by the community housing sector and supports the reduction of costs for owners who use land for this purpose. The new exemption will commence on 1 January 2025 for the 2025 land tax year onwards.

Waste levy changes

In Victoria we send around 4.8 million tonnes of waste to landfill each year. This is a waste of precious resources, which could be avoided by reducing the amount of waste we generate and recycling more. To drive this change, and support Victoria's transition to circular economy, waste levies will be increased from 1 July 2025. The Bill amends the *Environment Protection Act 2017* to increase the metropolitan municipal and industrial waste levy from to \$169.79 per tonne from 1 July 2025. The amendment also proportionally increases the waste levy rates at rural landfills, which attract lower levies than metropolitan landfills, and increases the reportable priority waste levy for Category C and D wastes to \$169.79 per tonne from 1 July 2025. The rates for other categories of priority waste are unchanged to continue encouraging the safe disposal of hazardous waste materials. These changes harmonise Victoria's waste levy rates with the comparable rates in New South Wales and South Australia and will encourage investment in resource recovery infrastructure and disincentivise waste going to landfill. The revenue raised from the waste levy provides core funding for agencies including the Environment Protection Authority, Sustainability Victoria and Recycling Victoria. The remaining revenue is added to the Sustainability Fund to advance environmentally sustainable uses of resources, best practices in waste management, and community action or innovation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions or address climate change in Victoria.

Conservation covenants

The Bill amends the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972* to establish a legislated trust to support the establishment of conservation covenants by Trust for Nature (the Trust) to protect and conserve privately owned land in metropolitan Melbourne. To support the Trust's work, the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972* is amended to establish the Vacant Land Conservation Covenants Account (the Account) under the Trust Fund. The Secretary of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) may authorise payments out of the Account to the Trust for reasonable costs and expenses incurred in relation to the entry of conservation covenants for land that is in metropolitan Melbourne, is vacant and unimproved (does not have a dwelling) and is within a zone other than a non-residential zone. DEECA's annual report prepared under Part 7 of the *Financial Management Act 1994* must include details about income and expenditure in relation to the Account along with the number of covenants entered into as a result of money paid out of the Account.

Vacant residential land tax amendmentsExpanding the holiday home exemption

As part of the *2024–25 Budget* the Bill amends the *Land Tax Act 2005* to extend the holiday home exemption from vacant residential land tax (VRLT) to certain homes owned by companies or trustees of trusts. Last

November the Government committed to extending the exemption to properties held in the name of a trust or company as of 28 November 2023. The current exemption only applies to holiday homes used and occupied by the person who owns the land, or the vested beneficiary of a trust to which the land is subject. The Bill broadens the exemption to allow shareholders of companies, certain beneficiaries of trusts and relatives of those shareholders and beneficiaries to satisfy the holiday home exemption requirements for a property owned by a company or trust. However, the exemption only applies if land has been continuously owned by the same company or a trustee since 28 November 2023 without any change in beneficial ownership (other than any transfers between relatives). The expanded exemption will commence on 1 January 2025 for the 2025 land tax year onwards.

Exempting land contiguous to holiday homes in metropolitan Melbourne

From 1 January 2026, VRLT will apply to unimproved residential land in metropolitan Melbourne that remains undeveloped for 5 years or more, in line with changes to the *Land Tax Act 2005* made by the *State Taxation Acts and Other Acts Amendment Act 2023*. This change may lead to situations where residential land is used and occupied as a holiday home and therefore exempt from VRLT, but adjoining residential land on a separate title is not exempt because it has been unimproved for 5 years or more. This would result in inconsistent treatment of a holiday home and any land contiguous to the home that enhances its use and occupation. The *Land Tax 2005* is therefore amended to allow unimproved residential land contiguous to an exempt holiday home to also be exempt. The amendment commences on 1 January 2026 in line with the expansion of the VRLT to unimproved residential land in metropolitan Melbourne.

Other amendments

Metropolitan planning levy

The Bill amends the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* to provide additional circumstances where metropolitan planning levy (MPL) can be refunded and to extend the 90-day validity period of the MPL certificate. MPL is imposed as a requisite for making a leviable planning permit application for the development of land in metropolitan Melbourne where the estimated cost of the development exceeds a threshold amount. The Commissioner of State Revenue (Commissioner) issues a certificate on the full payment of the levy, which is valid for 90 days after issue. The limited 90-day validity period and inability to provide refunds impose administrative difficulties on planning permit applicants and the State Revenue Office. This includes the need for applicants to extend planning permit applications in many cases, and unfair outcomes where the levy cannot be refunded in unforeseen circumstances. To improve the fairness and effectiveness of MPL, the Bill extends the 90-day certificate validity period to 180 days, and allows refunds applications to be made either where an applicant died before the application was made and no other person is proceeding with the application, or the relevant planning scheme was amended before the application was made resulting in either the proposed leviable development no longer being permitted or no longer requiring a permit. The amendments commence on the day after Royal Assent.

Land tax deductions

The Bill amends the *Land Tax Act 2005* to provide a taxpayer, who is a member of only one joint ownership or a beneficiary of only one trust and who owns no other lands individually, is not to be assessed at the secondary level. Both joint owners of land, and land held on trust where a trustee of a fixed trust or unit trust has notified the Commissioner of the beneficial interests in the trusts, are assessed for land tax at two levels. Joint owners are first assessed together on their jointly owned land, and then individually on all taxable land they own, including their interest in any jointly owned land. For affected trusts, the trustee is first assessed on the trust land at the general land tax rates, and then the beneficiary is individually assessed on all taxable land they own, including their beneficial interest in the trust land. In each case, a deduction applies to the individual assessment to reflect the share of land tax that was already assessed to the joint ownership or trustee. The changes to land tax under the COVID Debt Repayment Plan from the 2024 to 2033 land tax years include a temporary fixed charge amount, which currently applies at both the primary and secondary levels. This means the deductions available to some joint owners or relevant beneficiaries may not fully offset the secondary liability as intended, resulting in exposure to double taxation. To remove this anomaly the *Land Tax Act 2005* is amended to provide that a taxpayer, who is a member of only one joint ownership or a beneficiary of only one trust and who owns no other lands individually is not to be assessed at the secondary level. This restores the position of the above taxpayers prior to the introduction of the surcharge. The amendment operates retrospectively from 1 January 2024 to ensure it applies for the full duration of the temporary surcharge under the COVID Debt Repayment Plan (2024 to 2033), and that affected taxpayers are not subject to a higher land tax liability than intended for the 2024 land tax year.

Insurance duty

As announced in the *2023–24 Budget* and legislated in the *State Taxation Acts Amendment Act 2023*, duty on business insurance will be gradually abolished over a 10-year period starting from 1 July 2024. Business

insurance is defined as general insurance relating to specified classes of business in the Prudential Standards issued by the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA). To respond to changes to the classes of business in new Prudential Standards issued by APRA after the introduction of the 2023 amendments, the Bill amends the *Duties Act 2000* to include Directors & Officers insurance and Cyber insurance as classes of business insurance for insurance duty purposes. This amendment is proposed to come into operation from 1 January 2025, to provide insurance providers with sufficient time to update their systems and processes.

In recognition that APRA may issue new or amended Prudential Standards in the future, the *Duties Act 2000* is also amended to give the Treasurer the power, by notice published in the *Government Gazette*, to include other APRA classes of business as business insurance under the *Duties Act 2000*, or to carve out one or more kinds of insurance under a class of business from the same definition.

It is my intention to exclude public liability cover attaching to householder insurance (which is otherwise part of the public and product liability class of business) to ensure such insurance is not included within the definition of business insurance, by making of a declaration to that effect after the Bill has passed. This declaration will be effective from 1 July 2024.

Casino tax records

The Bill amends the *Gambling Taxation Act 2023* to enable the Commissioner to compel a casino operator to produce a document or information on a prospective basis for periods of up to 6 months. The Victorian casino operator is required to lodge a return and pay casino taxes to the Commissioner each month. The Commissioner under section 73 of the *Taxation Administration Act 1997* (TAA) has an existing investigative power to require the production of information, documents or things in a person's custody or control by way of written notice (section 73 notice). However, the Commissioner cannot use a section 73 notice to require the production of records on a regular or ongoing basis, such as the daily records created by the casino operator. The *Gambling Taxation Act 2023* is thus amended to enable the Commissioner to require the casino operator to provide information, documents or things specified in a written notice that are or may come into the operator's possession for a prospective period not exceeding 6 months. In recognition of historical non-compliance by the casino operator in disclosing and reporting on its operations for tax purposes, as identified by the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licensee, the penalty for failure to comply is equivalent to the existing penalty for failure to comply with a section 73 notice under the TAA (500 penalty units in the case of a body corporate and 100 penalty units in any other case). The Bill also amends the TAA to provide for the criminal liability of officers of the casino operator who fail to exercise due diligence to prevent the commission of this offence. The amendment commences on the day after Royal Assent.

Growth areas infrastructure contribution

The Bill amends the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* in respect of the growth areas infrastructure contribution (GAIC) to ensure it interacts with section 35 of the *Subdivision Act 1988* as intended. The *State Taxation Acts Amendment Act 2023* closed a loophole that previously enabled developers to utilise subdivisions under section 35 of the *Subdivision Act 1988* (section 35 subdivisions) to excise land for public purposes at an early stage and prior to GAIC being triggered, thus avoiding realisation of a GAIC liability. However, the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* further provides that subdivisions do not trigger GAIC if they are carried out by a public authority or municipal council and no additional lots are created, which is applicable to section 35 subdivisions. This may provide an avenue for developers to minimise their GAIC liability in a similar manner. The amendment provides that a section 35 subdivision is only an excluded subdivision if it subdivides land owned by a public authority or municipal council, which aligns with the policy intent to enable these authorities to separate part of a parcel of land that is or has been acquired compulsorily or by agreement from the balance of a parcel. The amendment commences on the day after Royal Assent.

Payroll tax for high-fee non-government schools

The Bill amends the *Payroll Tax Act 2007* in respect of the payroll tax exemption applying to non-government schools. The *State Taxation Acts Amendment Act 2023* amends the *Payroll Tax Act 2007* from 1 July 2024 to limit the exemption to low-fee non-government schools declared by the Minister for Education with the consent of the Treasurer (declared schools). However, the *Payroll Tax Act 2007* has other exemptions that high-fee non-government schools (undeclared schools) or related entities providing educational services to them could potentially claim in some circumstances. These include exemptions for wages paid by religious institutions or non-profit organisations to employees engaged exclusively in charitable work, or wages paid to persons providing educational services in connection with the curriculum of a school (other than for profit or gain). Therefore the *Payroll Tax Act 2007* is amended from 1 July 2024 to provide that undeclared schools are not eligible for exemption as religious institutions, and separate entities providing educational services in connection with the curriculum of undeclared schools are not eligible for exemption as religious institutions, non-profit organisations or for educational services, in relation to services provided to undeclared schools.

The amendment will reinforce the policy of limiting the exemption for undeclared schools so that their payroll tax treatment aligns with that of government school, without affecting the status of any declared schools from 1 July 2024.

I commend the bill to the house.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:36): I move, on behalf of my colleague Mr Mulholland:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (18:36): I have a further message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Financial Management Act 1994** in relation to gender responsive budgeting and for other purposes'.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (18:36): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Harriet SHING: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (18:37): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (Vic) 2006*, (the **Charter**), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024.

In my opinion, the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024 (the Bill), as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview of the Bill

The purpose of the Bill is to amend the *Financial Management Act 1994* (the FMA) to:

- a) include in the principles of sound financial management a requirement to consider and promote gender equality and inclusivity in the pursuit of spending and taxing policies
- b) provide for a statement of the gender impacts of the budget to be prepared in association with the budget for each financial year
- c) provide for the Minister to request a gender impact assessment (GIA) in relation to any matter under the FMA. This is intended to be used in limited circumstances where the *Gender Equality 2020* (GE Act) does not apply.

The Bill makes no consequential amendments to other legislation.

Human Rights Issues

No Charter rights are limited by the Bill. The Bill broadly promotes the rights enshrined in section 8 of the Charter by embedding gender responsive budgeting (GRB) practice into the FMA. In particular, the Bill

promotes section 8(2) of the Charter which provides that every person has the right to enjoy their human rights without discrimination, and section 8(3) which sets out the right to equality before the law and equal protection of the law.

I therefore consider that this Bill is compatible with the Charter.

Hon Jaclyn Symes MP
Attorney-General
Minister for Emergency Services

Second reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (18:37): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

Gender inequality negatively affects the lives of women, girls and gender diverse people. It continues to be a persistent challenge with gender gaps affecting outcomes for Victorians. Today, the Victorian Government fulfils its commitment to introduce Gender Responsive Budgeting into legislation. By embedding Gender Responsive Budgeting into legislation, we are acknowledging an inherent role of government to ensure gender impacts are considered through the funding process, which is one of our more powerful tools for effecting positive change. This is an important next step in the journey toward gender equality for all Victorians.

Victoria has been leading gender equality efforts in Australia, with our historical gender equality achievements starting back in 2016, with the release of *Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy*. This was followed by the publication of a Gender Equality Budget Statement with the *2017–18 Budget* and every year since, then the passage of the nation leading *Gender Equality Act 2020* and the introduction of Gender Responsive Budgeting practices in 2021. Building on these achievements, this Bill will keep Victoria at the forefront of gender equality in Australia.

Gender Responsive Budgeting is fundamental to promoting gender equality through the way budgets are constructed and funds are collected and spent, to ensure that better gender equality outcomes are achieved. Gender Responsive Budgeting does not mean a specific ‘budget for women’. Instead, it aims to reduce inequalities between women, men and gender diverse people by requiring gender analysis of how all budget policies affect them differently.

In Victoria, the practice of Gender Responsive Budgeting started with the *2022–23 Budget* and has continued to grow and become more mainstream across the Victorian Public Service. Setting legal foundations will help ensure its sustainability in the longer-term, ensuring that Governments of the future continue to address the specific needs of all Victorians.

Embedding Gender Responsive Budgeting within Victoria’s primary financial management and accountability legislation – the *Financial Management Act 1994* – demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that good and responsible budgeting also considers and promotes gender equality. Incorporating these provisions into the FMA signals that gender analysis is fundamental to good budgeting practice and highlights the role the budget has in achieving gender equality.

Turning to the specific provisions of the Bill:

This legislation establishes a high level, overarching principle; ensures gendered reporting as part of the budget; and builds on the existing requirements of the *Gender Equality Act 2020* to help ensure that gender is considered as part of key revenue and expenditure decisions.

The *Financial Management Act 1994* set out principles of sound financial management that the Government must follow. These principles include consideration of financial reporting, taxing and spending policies, and disclosure of financial information. The Bill adds a new principle to include a commitment to gender equality and inclusivity, thus binding future

governments in Victoria to Gender Responsive Budgeting as a fundamental principle of financial management. This principle will be supported by specific tools and practices which are not necessarily legislated as they may continue to change and evolve over time.

Accountability and transparency are important elements of all reform. The Bill includes a requirement for the annual budget papers to include a statement of the gender impacts of the budget. The legislation does not specify details of what must be published. This provides flexibility for future governments to determine the

form of this statement, while requiring governments to report on the overall impacts of the budget. This flexibility ensures that reporting stays fit for purpose as governments, the economy or Victoria change with time.

Finally, the Bill will also empower the Treasurer to request a Gender Impact Assessment in relation to any matter under the FMA. In most cases, major policy or funding proposals would meet the *Gender Equality Act 2020* requirement for a Gender Impact Assessment of having a **direct and significant impact** on the public. However, if there are circumstances in which policy or funding proposals **do not** meet this requirement, the Treasurer will be able to use this power to require Gender Impact Assessments. Examples might include funding for business case development, or funding for pre-commercialisation research – where the impact on the public is not direct and is not likely to manifest until many years and many steps later. It is intended that this power only be used to create additional requirements, beyond those of the *Gender Equality Act 2020*. There is no circumstance in which this power can be used to lessen the requirements of that Act.

The Bill has been the subject of extensive consultation within Government to ensure that the proposals were necessary and practicable.

This Bill will not only deliver on the Government's commitment to embedding Gender Responsive Budgeting practice for the future, but will help to move us closer to that vision where all Victorians are able to live in a safe and equal society, have access to equal power, resources and opportunities and are treated with dignity, respect and fairness.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:37): I move, on behalf of my colleague Mr Mulholland:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Motions

Community safety

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:37): I move, by leave:

That this house:

- (1) calls on the Minister for Skills and TAFE to immediately make a statement to the house concerning the deteriorating situation on a growing number of Victorian university campuses where violence and antisemitism is increasingly becoming dominant, students have occupied university buildings and the safety and security of students and staff on campus is increasingly at risk; and
- (2) asks the minister to outline what urgent actions she will take to restore order and guarantee safety of members of the university communities in Victoria.

Leave refused.

Adjournment

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (18:38): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Family violence

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (18:38): (893) My adjournment today is to the Attorney-General. All eyes are on the issue of family violence in the wake of a series of tragedies that have left Victorians reeling. The appalling rates of murder, violence and other types of assault that too many women and their children experience have sharply increased in just the last five years. The number of reported incidents of family violence in Victoria was 75,056 in 2017, and by 2022 that had increased by 23 per cent to 92,296 reported incidents. Yet despite rising reports of family violence, funding for the community legal sector has stagnated. In a similar time period, demand for Aboriginal legal services has doubled since 2018.

We all know that multisector approaches are essential in reducing the shockingly high rates of violence against women and children. While injections of increased income are welcome, we know that the solutions lie across the agencies that the government are responsible for. More stable and secure housing is needed, more social workers are needed, and it is timely to remind members that more community legal services are needed. Community legal services play a critical role in supporting women and children who are experiencing or at risk of family violence. This includes support with setting up safe parenting arrangements for children, child protection, social security matters, tenancy issues, migration, financial abuse services and sexual harassment services. But this part of the family violence support system is rarely recognised, despite the essential role that community legal services play – firstly, in keeping children and women safe and then in assisting them to begin to recover, by helping them navigate the legal system. Yet a lack of funding for the family violence services that the community legal centres provide means that centres are forced to turn away thousands of victim-survivors of family violence in need of their assistance. As one of the CEOs said last week:

Community Legal Centres across Victoria and the country are inundated by the sheer number of victim survivors needing support, but the funding just doesn't match up to demand.

Community and Aboriginal legal services who provide critical services to victim-survivors need more funding. Without it, the upward trend of women being killed by men will continue – it will worsen. My adjournment today is to ask the Attorney-General to commit to a long-term, sustainable funding model for community and Aboriginal legal services that is commensurate with the community's need and the community's demand.

Transport infrastructure projects

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:41): (894) The action I seek is from the Treasurer. In last week's budget the Treasurer presented Victorians with a slew of cruel cuts, severely impacting essential services such as health and education. These services could have been adequately funded had the Allan Labor government managed their projects effectively. To date this government has presided over an alarming \$40.4 billion in project cost overruns, a figure that could potentially increase as more information comes to light – and it inevitably will. The decade of financial mismanagement of infrastructure project cost overruns is the direct cause of the recent cut to basic services, which Victorians expected. These are not just numbers; they represent a failure to prioritise and protect Victorians. The worst examples of course include the North East Link, which has a 325 per cent blowout; the West Gate Tunnel, which has an 85 per cent blowout; and the Metro Tunnel, which has a 44 per cent cost blowout. These blowouts do not affect the Labor MPs that oversee them and do not affect those appointed to unelected positions who have their hands on the steering wheel. Instead, they impact everyday Victorians and their children, who will bear the financial brunt of this debt for generations.

These cost overruns should be understood. We must understand that they have a human cost to them. These cost overruns mean reduced public services. Cost overruns divert funds from essential public services like health care, education, ambulances et cetera, directly affecting my constituents. These cost overruns mean that during a cost-of-living crisis they have inflationary pressure. Cost overruns create job insecurity; there is an insecurity for local businesses and the community organisations. Lastly and most importantly, these cost overruns lead to an erosion of trust in government itself. How can Victorians trust a government when any figure that is quoted is rubbery and likely to be changed? Our society has lost genuine and transparent reporting – that is what we have lost. We have lost accountability for these initial underestimations and have failed to implement stricter oversight mechanisms to prevent future overruns. I urge all members in this chamber to recognise the urgency of addressing this financial mismanagement. It is crucial to support measures for improved fiscal management and governance over public projects.

The action I seek from the Treasurer is to know what steps he and his department have taken to understand the reasons for these blowouts and what specific changes he has implemented to guarantee that future projects do not cost Victorians more than they should.

COVID-19 vaccination

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (18:44): (895) My question is for the Leader of the Government, and the action that I seek is to clarify the following matter. Following legal advice sent to Fire Rescue Victoria in April or May 2022, did the Victorian Government Solicitor's Office fail to advise FRV that their vaccination policy breached section 10 of the Australian Immunisation Register Act 2015 regarding lawful permitted purposes for collection, use and storage of immunisation data, which does not include a purpose for mandatory vaccination policies and is not overridden by state and territory laws? Or did the VGSO advise Fire Rescue Victoria to continue breaching section 10?

Housing

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:44): (896) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Planning, and it is in relation to the redevelopment of the Barak Beacon estate. I have raised this issue in the house before through a constituency question, and I received a response from the minister on 3 May that spoke about the consultation that is being done, and in response it says:

'Stage 1 community engagement' commenced in June 2022 ...

...

'Stage 2 public consultation' was initiated in February 2024 where local residents, Port Phillip City Council and key stakeholders and the broader community were invited to provide feedback ...

I have met with residents on a number of occasions down there. In fact the Shadow Minister for Planning James Newbury and I met with residents there only last week, and they are still wanting to understand a number of questions from the government around the development, including wanting to meet with the Minister for Planning. They want to speak with the minister around their concerns, they want to know the due date for the decision and they want the minister to actually understand what the residents are saying. I know that there has been representation from a number of people, including the council, but the Beacon Cove Neighbourhood Association have also met with the local member and are wanting representation to the minister.

The City of Port Phillip have also written to Minister Shing in her capacity as Minister for Housing because this development is being led by Homes Victoria. In the letter to Minister Shing the council point out their concerns – they are very supportive of the development, but they cannot support the build in its current form. They lay out why, and they put this motion to council, which was passed on 6 May. They provided this information to Homes Victoria on 7 May, and the council officers have also sought confirmation from both Homes Victoria and the Department of Transport and Planning that council's concerns will be incorporated into the design. They are very concerned that their concerns around the design and those relevant changes that they would like to see will not be taken into consideration. So the action I seek is for the Minister for Planning to respond to the City of Port Phillip's concerns and also to the residents and the Beacon Cove Neighbourhood Association to allay them of the concerns and to go through those designs and to make sure that all of those concerns that they have raised will be dealt with accordingly.

Reproductive health leave

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:47): (897) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Industrial Relations and relates to reproductive health leave. I stood in this place for International Women's Day in March last year to advocate for reproductive health leave. It was not until over a year later that I received advice that my adjournment was better directed to the Minister for Industrial Relations, so here I stand again asking this government to act on reproductive health

leave. Normalising and supporting reproductive leave will contribute to gender equality in the workplace and in society.

Since I raised this matter last year, Queensland has come out and announced new workplace entitlements for Queensland public sector workers, including a nation-leading 10 days of reproductive health leave. This leave can be used for things like fertility and IVF treatment, chronic reproductive health conditions like endometriosis, preventative screening for things like breast and prostate cancers and other reproductive health treatments like hysterectomies and vasectomies. Although ideally we would like to see a broader approach that includes things like menstruation, abortion and miscarriages, this is still good to see a state government acting on this. Thankfully, they are not alone. The Victorian Women's Trust has had it in place for years, and private companies like Future Super have limited menstruation and menopause policies that provide employees with extra paid leave or flexible working arrangements.

People are sick of using sick leave, personal leave and leave without pay to deal with reproductive health. Reproductive health leave would assist people enormously and keep them in the workforce longer. No-one should have to use their sick leave for essential bodily functions, so the action I seek is that the minister adopt reproductive health leave as a matter of government public policy.

Mernda–Wollert rail line

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:49): (898) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and the action that I seek is for the minister to allocate funding for a feasibility study into extending the Mernda rail line to Wollert. The Wollert rail extension is a project that is straightforward, meets a clear community need and yet has been repeatedly ignored by a succession of Labor transport and infrastructure ministers.

The suburbs around the proposed rail corridor through Epping North and Wollert are growth areas where the population has been rapidly expanding for years and is predicted to go on increasing. Whittlesea council expects the population to double by 2041. An increasing number of workers and patients travel to the 400-bed Northern Hospital, which is directly across the road from the large Epping Plaza shopping centre. The government's own housing statement names Epping as one of 10 activity centres targeted for increased densification in pursuit of its housing target. Families were lured to Epping North, Wollert and surrounding suburbs with the promise of a new leafy community close to transport hubs that would offer an easy ride into the city for work or leisure.

The rail corridor from the existing Lalor station to the proposed Wollert station was identified and incorporated into the precinct structure plan back in 2017, but the rail line extension has not been built, and now commuters are stuck in traffic, particularly on Plenty Road, which is already chronically congested and set to get worse. Without a rail link people are forced to drive, and residents have for several years reported commute times of up to 2 hours one way as they struggle through the dense traffic. This takes a heavy toll on commuters, with many negative knock-on effects on family and leisure time, which are central to personal wellbeing. A rail extension from Lalor to Wollert has been on the cards for a long time, and the land reserved for the rail corridor runs through the suburbs as an empty reminder of an unfulfilled promise. The time to build the extension is sooner rather than later, and the time to do the feasibility study is right now.

The federal government committed \$250,000 towards a feasibility study for public transport in the area, and this commitment survived the Commonwealth infrastructure review that ended up killing other Victorian projects. The state government needs to match those funds and provide the initiative to get this feasibility study going, and yet the latest Victorian budget allocates no money for the study. This is a serious failure on behalf of the Allan Labor government. The feasibility study must be done as soon as possible so that any additional land required can be identified as soon as possible. Otherwise there is a real danger that land on or around the route will be built out, making the extension too difficult to pursue later on. The government has to stop kicking the can down the road and start planning – *(Time expired)*

Victorian systemic review of family violence deaths

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:53): (899) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Attorney-General, and the action I seek is to increase funding to the Coroners Court to enable the Victorian systemic review of family violence deaths to conduct extensive and timely inquests into family violence deaths. The Victorian systemic review of family violence deaths, a unit within the Coroners Court of Victoria, has advised victim families that due to resource limitations and an overbearing workload they are still investigating cases of Victorian women who were killed in 2022. A domestic violence murder warrants urgent interrogation, not a two-year waitlist. We cannot afford to wait years to hear the crucial recommendations and findings of the Coroners Court to address family violence. Each day that goes past we lose valuable time to invest in opportunities for intervention to improve our state's services for family violence victims and to reform police responses. We lose a chance to listen to victims before they are lost to the hands of violent men, and every four days another woman is murdered in this country. Families are forced to endure further trauma and unbearable suffering following what is the most traumatic event of their lives, waiting years for any closure on the circumstances of their loved one's death, only to essentially be told, 'We don't have enough money to find out how she died, to find out how the state failed to protect her, and we don't have time to investigate how this can be prevented in the future.'

One of the Coroners Court's main roles is to reduce preventable deaths by publishing their findings and recommendations for the state. Even the most basic of recommendations given in 2012 by the Coroners Court, such as providing training standards and supervision to applicant support workers, to develop a wideranging education and information campaign for parents and caregivers of all school-aged children on the prevention of child sexual abuse, or for Victoria Police to conduct specific inquiries into the perpetrator's access to or possession of weapons when a complaint of family violence and sexual assault is made, were refused by the Liberal government and successive Labor governments. As a result, in the past five years alone there have been almost 500,000 recorded incidents of family violence in Victoria alone.

This government claims it stands alongside us to combat violence against women, yet it is still simultaneously upholding the system that enables it to proliferate. Following the Bondi Junction attack, the New South Wales government allocated an additional \$18 million in funding to their Coroners Court, and I ask the Attorney-General to similarly respond to urgently address the violence against women epidemic in this state by increasing funding to the Coroners Court to ensure extensive and timely inquests into family violence deaths.

Point Cook Football Club

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (18:56): (900) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Community Sport regarding the lack of communication and clarity around the allocation of funds towards sporting clubs in the Western Metropolitan Region. The action I seek is for the minister to provide some clarity in relation to when the funding towards Point Cook Football Club's clubroom facilities upgrade will be delivered. On 22 October 2022, before the 2022 Victorian state election, the then Andrews Labor government pledged \$1.4 million to the redevelopment of the Point Cook Football Club's clubroom facilities. However, since that announcement there has been no further communication around the development or upgrade, leaving Point Cook Football Club uncertain of its future. Since there is no allocation in this budget again, the club is uncertain of what is going to happen.

A recent survey conducted by VicHealth revealed record levels of participation in organised sports, with 924,000 Victorians participating in local sports in 2022, which is just over 14 per cent of the population in Victoria. Should the upgrade be developed, the project for Point Cook Football Club would cater for Melbourne's fastest growing corridor, bringing cleaner and newer club facilities for all the members of the Point Cook community and its surroundings. Given Melbourne's reputation as the sporting capital of the world, I seek for the government to provide clarity to my stakeholders, the

Point Cook Football Club, and my constituents regarding the status of the crucial development and upgrade that is sought and that was promised. Will the government proceed as planned, or has it been added to the everlasting list of cancelled projects by this Allan Labor government?

Windfall gains tax

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:58): (901) My adjournment debate is for the Treasurer and concerns the distress caused by the application of Victoria's windfall gains tax on small family farms. Budget figures show revenue expected from this new tax measure will be \$40 million in 2023–24 rising to \$97 million in 2026–27. There is no doubt that it will have a significant impact on the businesses and tax bills of Victorians, including small family farms. The action I seek is a response from the Treasurer to a number of concerns which have been raised with me by those affected and their professional advisers.

Point one relates to concerns that small family farming businesses would face double taxation, being liable both for the new state windfall gains tax as well as for the federal capital gains tax on the same property value. The federal code in the Income Tax Assessment Act 1977 explicitly recognises land tax costs at section 110.25. It does not, however, recognise windfall gains tax, and the implications of this are concerning. Is an amendment required? Secondly, provisions of the Windfall Gains Tax Act 2021 at section 42 grant the state government precedence over other lenders as the first charge on land. It has been suggested that this may breach existing bank lending covenant conditions, potentially triggering the call in of bank loans and jeopardising family farm businesses and the livelihoods of many people. Where windfall gains tax assessments have been deferred for up to 30 years or until the next dutiable transaction, this security for the government would create a real financial risk for lenders. Finally, what is the impact on succession planning on family farms? Does section 32 of the Windfall Gains Tax Act mean that any intergenerational transfer of land, a common part of succession planning for small family farms, will trigger a windfall gains tax debt? If so, making payment due within 30 days would force land sales and make this practice impossible.

I am not talking here about farmers who want to sell their land for development; I am talking here about parents who want to hand on their land and businesses to their sons, daughters and grandchildren. Windfall taxes should never be payable when no money is realised – when there literally has been no windfall. I ask the Treasurer to respond to these points and preferably to produce an exemption to the tax for family farmers, who simply want to keep on farming without being treated like would-be speculative property developers.

Upfield line level crossing removals

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (19:01): (902) Thank you, President, and I appreciate the apology from earlier; I was not here, but it is all good. My adjournment tonight is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and the action I seek is for him to give an explanation for a clearly broken promise in regard to Upfield line level crossings. It was clear as day before the 2022 election, when the Labor Party promised – particularly in Brunswick – that it would be getting rid of eight more level crossings on the Upfield line. It was in a media release dated 19 September 2022, which said:

Community consultation and further project design will occur early next year –

that was 2023, and that did not actually occur, despite another member for Northern Metropolitan Region, Ms Watt, saying she would engage in that consultation –

with the level crossings to be removed by 2027.

It was revealed last week that the majority of this was in the area of Brunswick. So you can see what happened: Labor lost the election in Brunswick, had not picked up the seat from the Greens and then decided, very politically, like they have with most of their schools, that if they do not hold the seat they do not need to fund things in that seat. It has now been pushed out past 2030 – clearly a broken

promise. Not only is it a broken promise that leaves eight death traps, as the Premier and the former Premier called them, but they are in place for longer, contributing to traffic congestion and further hindering any chances of improving frequency on the Upfield line.

The main thing people talk to me about regarding the Upfield line is the frequency issue, but it is also the need for duplication all the way to Upfield. I am a big fan of what was proposed in a Public Transport Victoria development plan in 2012, under Terry Mulder and the Liberals and Nationals, which was for a northern loop line – you duplicate to Upfield, you connect to Somerton, now Roxburgh Park, and you also electrify the track from Craigieburn to Wallan. There is a fast-growing community in Wallan, and Donnybrook as well, who are still, like my colleagues in the western suburbs, stuck on V/Line trains in massive growth areas, which hinders their usage for regional Victoria as well. But this is all happening because we are spending \$216 billion on the Suburban Rail Loop. The Suburban Rail Loop, which no transport expert has ever suggested, means we cannot spend money on anything else.

It is a clear broken promise, the removals on the Upfield line. Labor went to the election saying they would get them done and it would be level crossing free. That has not happened. It was Mike Williams who was going to remove these level crossings. Well, he did not, and he will not. Labor needs to explain why this is a broken promise and why it has been pushed out to 2030.

Road maintenance

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (19:04): (903) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, on behalf of constituents right across northern Victoria who want to know why the government has effectively cut road funding when our roads are in such a terrible mess. Along with the endless potholes that plague our regional roads, constituents are also reporting expensive damage to their vehicles. In some cases the repair bills run into the thousands of dollars. In this cost-of-living crisis these unexpected and unnecessary costs are adding extra stress to families across my electorate. I have also spoken with local transport operators, who are battling constant repair bills for their heavy vehicles. These ongoing costs add a large burden to the cost of doing business in Victoria.

I am very concerned that the state of our roads will deteriorate further following a 90 per cent reduction in road repairs this financial year. This comes after Labor failed to meet its road repair targets by 25 per cent last year. The state budget hides the true state of spending on road maintenance, with flood recovery works mixed in with annual maintenance programs. But the road asset management budget is still 16 per cent less for next year than it was four years ago. Labor is also reducing performance targets in the budget papers related to the quality of roads. Even the government's own survey last year rated 91 per cent of roads as poor or very poor. I commend my Nationals colleague Annabelle Cleeland, who recently hosted several northern Victorian councils for an event with the National Transport Research Organisation. The NTRO takes an innovative approach to road maintenance and road safety, with the ability to provide insights into the technological advancements and environmental initiatives driving road standards. The councils heard about more sustainable and modern measures and testing approaches that can deliver both safer and more suitable approaches for the regions.

The Allan Labor government continues to demonstrate a lack of care for the state's road network, particularly those in regional Victoria, accepting poor road standards that are generations behind other states. The action I seek is for the state government to increase the funding allocation to maintain and build our roads to a better standard and make up for years of neglect.

Fosterville Gold Mine

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (19:06): (904) I am pleased to rise in the adjournment and seek some action by the Minister for Energy and Resources. This relates to a so-called historic profit-sharing arrangement between the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and the Canadian gold company Agnico Eagle over the Fosterville mine near Bendigo that has created, according to a number of people who are very significant players in the minerals industry in Victoria, a significant

future baseline precedent for future investment in the state of Victoria. I pay tribute to the work that Fosterville does, but disappointingly this has been done with a lack of detail about the mechanics and specifics of the signed agreement. There has been no government notice or consultation on this matter, and many in the industry – stakeholders – have not been talked to by the minister, the minister’s office, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action or indeed Resources Victoria. I should say, this is best directed to the minister for resources. The industry says it was blindsided by this development and that that is an understatement.

I heard what Minister D’Ambrosio said at the Yoorrook Justice Commission on 22 April, where she talked at length about benefit-sharing operations with the traditional owner groups and the cost that that was likely to impose on Victorians. Traditionally since 1851, resources in Victoria have been owned by the Crown and have been shared through royalties with all Victorians no matter what their racial or ethnic or other background is, so what I am seeking here are the details of this agreement between the Dja Dja Wurrung and the Agnico group, including the compensation metrics and who was consulted about this. Specifically, we are seeking the release of the agreement.

The minister could bring the resources sector and the Victorian community into her knowledge base with this. If she or another minister that she is aware of has a copy of that agreement, it should be released. We should be able to see what has been struck, and we should be able to understand the mechanism by which that was done – who was consulted, how this was undertaken. I mean, the idea that secret deals can be done behind the scenes and pay-offs occur in these sorts of ways concerns many Victorians. Release the document and explain how it was arrived at.

Responses

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (19:09): Ms Copsey raised a matter for the Attorney-General. Mr Welch raised a matter for the Treasurer. Mrs Deeming raised a matter for the Leader of the Government. Ms Crozier raised a matter for the Minister for Planning. Ms Payne raised a matter for the Minister for Industrial Relations. Ms Lovell raised a matter for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Ms Purcell raised a matter for the Attorney-General. Mr Luu raised a matter for the Minister for Community Sport. Mrs McArthur raised a matter for the Treasurer. Mr Mulholland raised a matter for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Mrs Broad raised a matter for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and Mr Davis raised a matter for the Minister for Energy and Resources. I will refer them accordingly.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 7:10 pm.