



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 14 August 2024

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Georgie Crozier

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

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

¹ Resigned 7 December 2023

² Lib until 27 March 2023

³ LDP until 26 July 2023

⁴ Appointed 7 February 2024

Party abbreviations

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

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

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

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

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

Committees

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Appointment of a Person to Conduct the Financial Audit of the Victorian Auditor-General's Office

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:34): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I present this voluminous five-page report on the appointment of a person to conduct the financial audit of the Victorian Auditor-General's Office from the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I move:

That this report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Nick McGOWAN: I move:

That the Council take note of the report.

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Auditor-General – Building a Capable and High-performing Public Service Workforce, August 2024
(*Ordered to be published*).

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Rail Safety National Law Application Act 2013 – No. 73.

Social Services Regulation Act 2021 – No. 72.

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001 – Notice of amendment to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council for an assessment of values of state forests in the Central Highlands, under section 26C of the Act.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

Motions

Middle East conflict

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:48): I move, by leave:

That this house:

- (1) notes that since the Legislative Council's resolution on 17 October 2023 concerning Israel and Gaza, which stated that this house 'stands with Israel', the following have occurred:
 - (a) 477 out of 564 schools have been destroyed or damaged in Gaza;
 - (b) on 10 August 2024 dozens of civilians, including children, were killed by an Israeli air strike on the al-Tabin school;
 - (c) more than 38,000 civilians have been killed in Gaza and almost all of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been displaced;

- (d) United Nations officials have said there are no safe areas for people to seek refuge, and many of the designated humanitarian areas have been bombed; and
- (2) calls on the Victorian government to end their relationship with the Israeli defence ministry and with Israeli arms manufacturers.

Leave refused.*Members statements***Vietnamese community**

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (09:49): I rise this morning to say congratulations to the Vietnamese Community in Australia – Victoria Chapter. On Friday I attended a fundraiser for the new Footscray Hospital in my electorate of Western Metropolitan Region. Next year will be the 50th anniversary for the Vietnamese community in Australia to celebrate their resettlement in Victoria from the Vietnam War. The VCA, led by President Duy Nguyen Quang, has organised fundraising for this new hospital in the western suburbs, with great support from the Quang Minh temple, the Vietnamese Catholic community of Melbourne, the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia and the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association. Also present was Western Health. In total the Vietnamese community raised over \$100,000 in one night for the western suburbs, and I want to say congratulations to the whole Vietnamese community. Being a Vietnamese Australian and a member for Western Metropolitan Region, I am very proud of their contributions to the wider community.

Croydon train station

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:51): I rise to update the house about an exciting event that I attended on Monday morning in Croydon. It was a real pleasure to attend the official opening of the Croydon train station. Croydon train station reopened to passengers as local commuters were able to access the first train into the city on the Lilydale line. The Lilydale line, as a result of this level crossing removal, is the first rail line in the Melbourne to become level crossing free. I just want to give a shout-out to Josh Bull, our Parliamentary Secretary for Transport and for our important transport infrastructure projects, for coming along and celebrating the opening with me as well. I am very pleased to say that there were many, many commuters who took great delight in accessing free cupcakes and coffee vouchers, and they were truly happy to see what a beautiful station it actually is. The station is now fully accessible and features two elevated platforms, lifts, toilets and a heated waiting room as well. The station precinct will also feature 650 metres of new walking and cycling paths and more than 70,000 new trees, shrubs and grasses. I cannot wait to attend the community planting day with the local community members and school students as well. More than 1600 people use the Croydon station daily, and 72,000 passengers use the Lilydale–Belgrave line each weekday, making it the second busiest rail line in the metropolitan network. I am pleased to say that the new bus interchange will also be completed in spring.

Flood mitigation

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:52): I have heard experienced members of this place talk about committee inquiries that are sometimes ignored or which gather dust, so I was delighted to see that the City of Melbourne's Future Melbourne Committee was straight out of the blocks in responding to the 2022 flood inquiry. The inquiry recognised that floods do not respect local government boundaries, yet we expect individual councils to manage flood overlays in isolation from their neighbouring councils. Accordingly, the Environment and Planning Committee recommended that the state government coordinate a regional approach to planning scheme changes that are addressing, for example, flood overlays. Given the startling new flood modelling for the Maribyrnong River, this resolution from the City of Melbourne calls on the Minister for Planning to coordinate a single planning scheme amendment process that spans the cities of Melbourne, Maribyrnong and Moonee Valley. I hear people talking about councils being slow to respond, but I have to say that that has not been my experience, and that is certainly not reflected in this unanimous resolution from the City of Melbourne. Congratulations to council for their initiative and plaudits to councillors Rohan

Leppert and Davydd Griffiths, who moved and seconded the motion respectively. I would also like to recognise Cr Leppert, who has been a talented and tireless advocate for his local community and is moving on after 12 years on council.

Schools funding

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (09:54): Last week we celebrated the Allan Labor government's 2023–24 building fund for low-fee non-government schools. St Joseph's Primary School in Warrnambool and St Thomas Primary School in Terang have both received \$2.4 million. The money will be used for construction of new learning spaces and updating tired facilities. I know this exciting news has been uplifting for so many teachers and students, and I congratulate all successful school communities across the state.

Warrnambool Repair Cafe

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (09:54): On another matter, last week I visited the Warrnambool Repair Cafe, part of a worldwide movement that started in the Netherlands in 2009. It was wonderful to see the convergence of volunteer problem solvers with those that came along with something to fix. This included clothing, electronics, jewellery, shoes – the list goes on. There are now over 30 repair cafe volunteers in Warrnambool, and very importantly, it is a place for people to come together and share a cuppa and a homemade cake. Thanks to Brenda O'Connor and Jacinta Van Bakel and the repairers that were there that day. Also, a special thankyou to the Merrivale Community Association, who took the initiative to create the repair cafe in the first place. It is so important to repair and reuse rather than buying more junk from overseas.

Peaceful protest

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:55): Today Dr Bob Brown will be sentenced after being found guilty last week of a crime. What was his crime? Was he being violent? Was he being destructive? No. He and other forest defenders were peacefully protesting to protect swift parrot habitat from logging. Lack of cooperation or inconvenience, resistance and peaceful protest – these are not violent acts, and yet there is a disturbing trend of Australian governments to recast those who are exercising their democratic right to peaceful protest as perpetrators of violence and criminalising them. We are seeing the right to protest being curtailed at every turn by governments, including Victorian Labor, with attempts to silence and marginalise those who dare to stand up to those who are the real criminals, those who exploit and plunder our environment and climate for profit, those who support war and genocide and those who enable the richest to grow their wealth off the backs of the poorest. The right to peaceful protest is fundamental to our democracy, and our governments should be protecting it, not repressing it. Bob Brown, in reflecting on this antidemocratic slide by governments in Australia, said to us last week, 'They can't jail our consciences.' Indeed they can't – and you never will.

Homelessness Week

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:57): Last week was Homelessness Week, a time to acknowledge the struggles of some of the most marginalised members of our community. We began the week right here on the steps of Parliament with a powerful display of origami houses, which filled the steps and highlighted that there are 60,000 households in the Victorian community in need of social housing support. But I did not stop there. I also visited St Mary's House of Welcome with the Minister for Housing Harriet Shing, where we got to see firsthand the services they provide: warm meals, warm showers and even warmer company. Seeing the dedication of the St Mary's team and the way they care for every single person that comes through the door was just heartwarming. One of the regular visitors to St Mary's took the opportunity to show me the immaculate garden that he had created in the outside area of the house of welcome. He clearly has a green thumb and a passion for plants. He has cultivated some of the most gorgeous shrubs and flowers I have ever seen, and his pride in showing me was even bigger. He had made a beautiful addition to St Mary's and a powerful impression on me.

I look forward to visiting again to see the team continuing their amazing work with the wonderful people who access their services, and I hope to get another update on the garden when I am there.

Greyhound rescue

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (09:59): I talk about issues within greyhound racing a lot. Victoria does not just have record-high track deaths, skyrocketing injury rates and dogs being hidden away before being killed, we also have an overbreeding crisis that the government and Greyhound Racing Victoria are unwilling to address. Right now the greyhound racing industry is breeding five times more puppies than industry groups have the capacity to rehome. That means that volunteer-run, donor-funded and largely anti-racing community rescue groups are stepping in to pick up the pieces without a single cent – not a cent – from the government to do this work. But right now they are overwhelmed, with a six-month-long waitlist. Trainers are literally begging them to take dogs – they even begged my office to take dogs. But we simply cannot due to the sheer number of them compared with the limited places for them to go afterwards. That is why organisations like Greyt Greys Rescue are right now calling for foster carers, so they can free up more space and spare more dogs in need right now from their suffering. I have been a foster carer, and it is incredibly rewarding. I am very bad at it; I always foster fail. It simply requires taking a dog for a period of time until they find their perfect match through the adoption process. Fostering quite literally saves lives, so if you can offer up your heart, your home and, to be honest, probably your couch, please sign up to foster today.

Housing

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:00): I have two matters to raise today. Last week I joined the Minister for Planning in the other place, Minister Kilkenny, in my community of South Yarra not too far away from where my office is, and I had the opportunity to join the official topping out of the Greystar South Yarra development, one of Australia's largest build-to-rent projects. It is less than 4 kilometres from the city and surrounded by all that you need – shops, essential services and a great culture. These are places where many Victorians want to live. We know that we have to do all we can to build more, and this new place helps us get there, with 617 new homes across more than 3300 square metres of land. Well done to all involved.

Tom Pritchard

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:01): My second matter is I was deeply saddened to learn that the last Rat of Tobruk had passed away peacefully. Tom Pritchard was 102 and one of the last standing of the greatest generation. We all know the story and the sacrifice. The Rats of Tobruk held the Libyan port of Tobruk for 231 days against the onslaught of the Nazi Africa Corps, but more than that he was a larrikin and a true-blue Aussie. Rest in peace.

Production of documents

Health services

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:01): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that in a secretly recorded meeting of executives from some of Victoria's largest public hospital networks the following measures were considered to meet the Victorian government's demand to cut costs:
 - (a) bed closures;
 - (b) shutting entire hospital wards;
 - (c) reducing elective surgery;
 - (d) cancelling breast screening;
 - (e) cutting staff responsible for outpatients;
 - (f) closing special care cots used to treat critically sick babies;

PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTS

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- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, pursuant to standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within two weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution:
 - (a) a copy of all prebudget submissions, briefing notes or proposals provided by every Victorian public health service, to the Department of Health, between 1 May 2024 and 24 July 2024; and
 - (b) a copy of the latest 2024–25 model budget sent to every Victorian public health service by the Department of Health.

I move this motion because this has been a very significant issue that has caused so much angst within communities around hospital and health service funding. What we have seen is letters from the Minister for Health and the Secretary of the Department of Health a few months ago given to health services saying that they have to find saving cuts within their budgets. Of course that lead to a huge amount of angst in relation to how services were going to be able to provide health care to those patients, what jobs would be lost and the issues surrounding support in local communities.

There was a leaked tape that highlighted exactly what the government was asking health services to do that would have that direct impact. That leaked tape was really quite significant. It talked about bed closures, shutting entire hospital wards, reducing elective surgery, cancelling breast screening, cutting staff responsible for outpatients, closing special care cots for babies, shutting down dialysis beds – a whole range of services that these health executives were talking about in relation to the demands that the government had put onto health services.

That anxiety around the issue then, despite the government’s recent announcement – although I know the Treasurer has come out today and has not ruled anything out, including increasing taxes to fund the funding required for health services – just shows where we are at. I think it is in the best interests of Victorians that we have those submissions that hospitals provided to the government so we understand exactly what they were asked to do, because I have no faith in the government sticking to their plan. They are going to amalgamate health services across the state – that is clear. We have seen what happened at the Royal Children’s Hospital, with senior clinicians standing up for their right to be a standalone paediatric service in the state, the CEO siding with the clinicians and then the targeting by the department.

It has been absolutely disgraceful, and we have had no transparency. There remains anxiety amongst health services around how much funding we are getting. The announcement of last week – how much of that are we getting? There is no clarity. I have had messages this morning from concerned executives around the state saying, ‘We haven’t heard anything.’ This is why this documents motion is incredibly important. The government need to do this in the interest of transparency so that we can understand exactly what health services were asked to do and the extraordinary issue around the health minister and department secretary saying under no circumstances will these funding cuts be reversed. We know that they were so significant, they were having an impact and there has been provided some top-up funding, but we do not know where it is going to. That, I think, is an enormous concern. I would urge the government to provide these documents in the interests of transparency and to understand exactly what the government was asking health services to actually do.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (10:06): The Allan Labor government continues to put patients over politics. The basis of this motion is scaremongering, which the Liberals have been doing for several months about the future of our hospitals – scaremongering about the kinds of things that they themselves did to our health system when in government. The cuts and closures are a Liberal–National reality. In my own community the Mortlake hospital was closed and the Koroit hospital was closed under a Liberal government. We will always support our hospitals. That is what Labor does. This government is continuing to govern for the future. Despite the opposition seeking to sow division and fear in our communities with motions such as this, our government will continue to deliver.

The Allan Labor government will invest a further \$1.5 billion to support our hospitals to deliver world-class care, building on more than \$8.8 billion we invested in the most recent budget. We are

very proud of our hospital system in Victoria. This additional funding is in recognition of additional demand and will support additional planned surgeries, further grant funding and the implementation of electronic medical records for those services who do not have them. We are not closing and cutting. We are protecting the local services we know Victorians trust and rely on. We are not going to forcibly amalgamate hospitals, because we do not believe taking this decision out of the hands of health services and their communities is in the best interest of patients. Portland District Health, South West Healthcare, Terang & Mortlake Health Service, Timboon and District Healthcare Service and Western District Health Service all provide professional patient care across the south-west.

Reflecting personally on Timboon, that is where part of my family is based. I had a baby at Timboon hospital, my mother had a baby at Timboon hospital, my grandfather died at Timboon hospital, my family members are variously employed at Timboon hospital and my first experience of fundraising as a tiny child was for Timboon hospital, so I can guarantee you I understand the importance and the Allan Labor government understands the importance of small community hospitals and the service they provide to those communities. I give a big shout-out to the work they do, being there at critical times of need, keeping clinical patient care as their key focus and helping our communities stay healthy.

I am proud of the truly significant stage 2, \$384 million investment being made by this government to expand South West Healthcare. The Allan Labor government has accepted in full 26 of the 27 recommendations proposed by the expert advisory committee as part of the health services plan. I go back to the redevelopment of South West Healthcare. That project is well and truly underway, with the completion of the laundry and supply department, which is automated in a way that is very, very similar to an Amazon warehouse, where products are picked and supplied to hospitals across the whole region. It is a fantastic example of how the Allan Labor government is supporting regionalisation and coordination whilst allowing hospitals to maintain their own governance and make sure that the services, and in this case laundry and supplies needed by hospitals in the south-west, are reliably delivered.

Under the current reforms, the government will establish Hospitals Victoria, a new agency in the Department of Health with a CEO that reports directly to the Minister for Health and that is fully focused on supporting hospitals to deliver frontline care. For instance, currently hospitals have different payroll and IT systems, and it will be the remit of Hospitals Victoria to ensure that those things are supported and modernised so that patient care can be focused upon.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:11): I am very pleased to rise and make a contribution this morning on the short-form documents motion Ms Crozier has moved in relation to funding for our health system. We absolutely on this side of the chamber welcome the opportunity to talk about health and hospitals and to talk about the absolutely outstanding record that this Labor government has in investing in our healthcare system, which obviously you need to look at in the context of what the alternatives are for our healthcare system and what our opponents' track record and policy settings would mean for our healthcare system. If we are in a debate which is seeking to get some documents about healthcare budgets, what the state budget shows, what Labor's track record shows, is that we invest in health care.

Labor invests in health care; Labor invests in hospitals. We invest in our workforce, we support our nurses and our doctors, we are building more hospitals and we are expanding existing hospitals, and what is that leading to? It is not just about supporting the workforce, it is not just about building the buildings, it is about improving patient care, because that is what our hospitals are about – improving patient care. That is why I am so excited to have a debate about health funding in this place, because our track record is so good compared to the record of those opposite, who have a significant record of cutting. When it comes to health, the Liberals cut and Labor invests. The Liberals shut hospitals, the Liberals privatise hospitals, and Labor buys them back. Labor builds new hospitals and Labor opens new hospitals. So if you want to get into a debate about what our healthcare funding does, that is what it does.

Not only are we funding more infrastructure, we are also supporting the workforce, backing our nurses, with record investment in our healthcare workforce – the latest on top of the work that we have done in prior budgets by doing things like legislating nurse-to-patient ratios, something that not everyone in this Parliament supports. In fact the Liberal Party opposed nurse-to-patient ratios. We continue to back our nurses, with a 28 per cent pay increase over the next four years. We are offering free nursing and midwifery scholarships. We are offering grants to GPs to help to cover the cost of their study, and we are offering free TAFE. And we have recruited more than 3000 doctors, nurses, midwives and other health professionals from overseas to work in our health system since April 2022. We are supporting our health workforce through the investments we are making in our budget, which this motion is seeking further detail on.

I think when people actually have a chance to have a look at the facts rather than the misinformation, they will see exactly what is happening in terms of the Labor government's investment in our healthcare system. I mentioned briefly earlier what that investment is achieving, because we do know that there is considerable demand and there is considerable pressure on our healthcare system. In the last quarter alone we saw record demand in emergency departments: over half a million presentations, 6 per cent more than in the same period last year. That is why there is additional funding of \$1.5 billion to support our hospitals, which has been put on the table in terms of the current budget negotiations, on top of the \$11 billion that was in the budget, of which about \$8.8 billion is being used to fund our hospitals to meet that demand. That is in recognition of the increased demand to support additional planned surgeries, further funding to support grants and obviously, as Ms Ermacora mentioned, the implementation of electronic medical records for those services which do not have them.

Labor is proud of our record of investing in our healthcare system. We are proud of our record of investing in our healthcare workforce, and what that is doing is delivering better and world-class health care to more Victorians.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:16): Thank you for the chance to rise and make a contribution on the motion before us. I am not here to really oppose the motion, more to question its premise. The government does not cut corners when it comes to health, and it absolutely does not cut corners when it comes to health spending. Our world-class health system is built on a decade of consistent investment in hospitals. We know that Victorians deserve nothing less than right now in the right place at the right time a world-class health system.

Providing this standard of health care has become more challenging since the pandemic. But unlike those opposite, we do not shrink from the challenge. We know that every cent invested in health is absolutely justified. That is why in this year's budget we made a multiyear investment of \$11 billion in our healthcare system, including \$8.8 billion in hospital funding. But we wanted to go further, so we have listened to healthcare workers, other stakeholders and community groups. We know the challenges they face. Our population over the last 10 years has astonishingly grown 15 per cent, and as our population lives longer, they present with more complex and more chronic conditions. Additionally, in the last quarter alone it is worth noting that emergency presentations rose by 6 per cent, to 503,000 presentations. Some services are really facing an incredibly challenging time with these increased services without electronic medical record systems. In recognition of that, we are now investing a further \$1.5 billion to support our hospitals to meet the challenges of post-pandemic health care.

The one that I am particularly excited about, and I recall having spoken about it more than once, is the priority primary care centres. They have been expanded to 29 centres right across the state and have reached a record 475,000 visits. That is five MCGs in Melbourne measurement. More than 338 000 patients passed through Victoria's innovative virtual emergency department between September 2022 and June 2024. Knowing some young families, can I just point out how much that service has been appreciated when you have got the young ones at home. That virtual emergency department is helping prevent unnecessary trips to the hospital, with 86 per cent of those going through

the virtual ED avoiding unnecessary trips to the hospital. This really does take a weight off our hospitals and our emergency departments. It frees up our doctors and nurses to treat more patients.

This government's \$1.5 billion COVID catch-up plan has worked wonders for Victoria's healthcare system. There has been a drop in the waitlist of more than 33 per cent since it launched in April 2022, the lowest it has been since pre-pandemic 2020, with almost 210,000 planned surgeries performed in 2023–24, the highest financial year figure on record. Between February 2023 and March 2024 the average emergency department length of stay for admitted patients reduced by 55 minutes, and for those that were not admitted it reduced by 14 minutes. We do not cut corners, we do not cut costs and we do not cut services. We invest and we expand to give all Victorians the care that they need at a time when they need it most. I could go on and list the 12 hospitals that were shut down, but I am not going to do that. I am instead going to talk about making record investments in the state's healthcare workforce, including our valued and most beloved nurses and midwives, through our scholarships and our GP grants to cover the cost of studies and the recruitment of more than 3000 overseas doctors, nurses, midwives and other health professionals, some that I have met in the Parkville precinct who are absolutely loving life in Melbourne. This is preparing Victoria for any healthcare challenge and the challenges of a really complex system that have been thrown our way, and that is why we have one of the best healthcare systems not just in Victoria but in the world, attracting world-class talent each and every day.

I will just say that we will be supporting this motion, but let me be clear that this government is doing the vital work that needs to be done to keep Victoria's healthcare system running at full steam and continuing for many, many years to come.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:21): Following on the short-form documents motion – I have limited time, 1 minute – as has been said before, you have shut and you have cut health services; there has been no shortage of privatisations and closures of hospitals on your side. We open hospitals. We bring them back into public hands. I was just at Orbost, where they are getting a new endoscopy facility and a \$45 million brand new aged care wing. For Maffra hospital there is \$70 million for a new aged care wing; for Wonthaggi Hospital, \$115 million; and for Frankston Hospital, a billion-dollar new hospital – and this is just in the eastern region alone. What about up in Goongerah, right up in the bush? HoloLens is ensuring our nurses and our locals have the best, latest, cutting-edge technology to ensure they can be seen by specialists without having to leave their own communities. We are out of time, but we will happily debate on health any single day of the week.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (10:22): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 522, be postponed until the next day of meeting.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (23): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaele Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, David Ettershank, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (13): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion agreed to.

*Bills***Government Construction Projects Integrity Bill 2024***Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Evan Mulholland:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:29): It is a delight for me to rise and speak to the bill before us today – that is, the Government Construction Projects Integrity Bill 2024, moved by Mr Mulholland. I had in fact been ready to speak on the short-form documents motion, and I had some good points to make in my remarks on that. Before I get into speaking on the bill before us – and it is one that I am familiar with, having scrutinised it recently in the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee, which I did discuss yesterday as we tabled the *Alert Digest* No. 10 – there is indeed more that I would like to go into when it comes to our contributions. I have got 29 minutes, and I am ready to talk about the private members bill. There is more that I wanted to go into on the short-form documents motion. Maybe that is why my team voted with me to make sure we got to that, because I had some good points to make, but instead I will go to the bill.

I have got to say I stand here with a bit of a heavy heart because many of the conversations that have happened around the CFMEU and the bill before us, the short-form documents motion and the debates last week failed to accurately reflect the pain and the heartache felt by the family and friends of Ben Nash. Ben was known to many and loved by all. He was a gun at football. He was passionate about his career. He had some battles with his mental health. He came out the other end, and he really threw himself into what he loved. He had a really bright future, and those around him knew it. He threw himself into what he loved, but Ben – this young Indigenous man, a proud man – was found unresponsive on the morning of his 19th birthday. It is a day that should have been celebrated by his family, but instead they started that day in such profound trauma and with such loss – unimaginable loss. Can I take a moment to reflect on this tragedy before I speak on it and give my deepest condolences to his family, his friends, his elders, his ancestors and his loved ones. Bullying, coercion, standover tactics and criminality have no place on our construction sites or in our union movement and no place in our party. This state has a proud history of championing workers rights and supporting Victorians through progressive industrial relations reforms.

As someone who came from the union movement – it is true – I take really great pride in being part of a party that consistently defends workers and their rights. In fact not too long ago I was a workplace safety organiser at a union, and it was something that I loved. Every day my job was to help people and make sure that they came home safe from their work and came home safe to their families and their loved ones. It was a remarkably rewarding and fulfilling role, being a part of our movement. Those opposite in proposing this legislation before us are really targeting individual workers and eroding their collective rights, all without considering that these reforms before us in the bill may be constitutionally or indeed legally flawed. This is what happens when we have some really rushed bills come before us. This is a hastily assembled bill that disregards proper procedures. It masquerades as a solution that fixes everything.

The alleged behaviour of certain CFMEU members, which has come to light in recent weeks, is absolutely, unquestionably unacceptable. It does not reflect the broader union movement. We on this side unequivocally condemn any actions that could harm or endanger workers. Unions protect workers, and unionism is a collective action of workers standing in solidarity to ensure safe working conditions and the wellbeing of our families. The behaviour allegedly exhibited by a small group within one union is the antithesis of unionism – we know this. The alleged behaviour is self-serving and alienating, and it has no place in our movement.

To ensure that such behaviour is not able to take root in the construction industry, the Premier has already initiated an independent review into Victoria's construction sector. This review will explore

ways to enhance the bodies overseeing construction companies and unions to conduct effective investigations into allegations or criminal unlawful conduct. The Premier has already referred serious misconduct allegations to Victoria Police and also to the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission here in Victoria. Moving forward with the opposition's bill today will mean disregarding those measures already put in place by the government and instead replacing them with some reforms that really falsely claim to combat corruption and organised crime, without any consideration for the broader implications or feasibility.

I ask myself: where is the analysis of the practical, operational ability of this bill? Has the opposition, in drafting this, engaged with Victoria Police or consulted with broader construction groups from all sides of that sector? Will these reforms impose an unmanageable regulatory burden on the very people that this bill claims to support? Are there any assurances that these reforms are even lawful, and has the opposition considered this? We know that legislating in the industrial relations arena is legally complex, and it falls under Commonwealth jurisdiction – a point that has been made many, many times. We may be wasting our time debating a bill that is not only toothless in impact but broadly potentially legally invalid.

We on this side recognise that the development of substantial and complex reform takes time and demands finesse, engagement, consultation and thorough consideration to minimise unintended consequences. We have already committed to introducing legislation in the coming weeks to toughen existing anti-bikie laws, making it easier for police and the courts to prevent certain individuals from associating with one another. These reforms are the product of extensive consultation with direct input from those responsible for enforcing them. True to form, those opposite have hastily cut corners and ignored the practical consequences of their union-busting bill, despite the community input that is available to them and the goodwill that is out there.

I want to take a minute to look at the second-reading speech. Mr Mulholland, you said that you are a big believer in second chances, but in this bill that is really hard to believe. Part 3 of the bill seeks to punish individuals with irrelevant historical convictions even if they have never reoffended. There is a clear lack of empathy or understanding for reformed offenders here, demonstrating a really cold, calculating and heartless approach by those opposite.

This bill, alarmingly, includes broad definitions of who can be identified as a member of a criminal organisation. This could theoretically mean that a high school ex-boyfriend, someone you have not seen for 15 years who is now a member of an outlaw bikie gang, could automatically disqualify you from working in the construction industry by virtue of the fact that you had once been in a relationship back in the day. It is an absolute travesty that those opposite show no concern for Victorians who may lose their entire livelihood for nothing, based on an old association. It gets even worse. This bill could also prevent victim-survivors of family violence from obtaining employment in the construction industry because of their violent ex-partner simply due to an association. I am absolutely gobsmacked when I read this. It is utterly obscene, and it highlights the consequences of this bill, which is full of unintended consequences.

The inclusion of prospective members as people targeted by the bill would also force an innocent third party to scrutinise the lives of those around them to ensure that they can work or continue working in the industry. For the opposition it is not enough to keep your own record clean, you also have to monitor everyone else's in order to earn an honest living. This provision would also require Victoria Police to disclose sensitive intelligence about someone who might be about to join a declared criminal organisation to a potential employer, without any regard for the risk this poses to Victoria Police's rightfully confidential operational tactics and intelligence-gathering processes. This bill would prevent Victorian workers from earning an honest living in construction.

Under the guise of believing in second chances, simultaneously we have got a bill before us that perpetually punishes Victorian workers for past actions. This is a chaotic opposition that we are dealing with with this bill before us. It does not just reject second chances; it does not even believe in first

chances. This bill seeks to strip away the potential livelihoods of individuals simply because they may be associated with someone who is a current, former or prospective member of a declared organisation. There is no clear definition of ‘associated’, nor are there any exceptions provided. The bill as it stands would prevent workers from securing or retaining employment even if they have never been convicted of a crime.

According to those opposite, in the bill that we are debating it is enough for Victorians to be made unemployed just because, for example, a family member, even an estranged one, fits the ludicrous definition of a member of a criminal organisation. For me that is really quite troubling, because for some of us who have very, very big families, including people that I have not spoken to in 35 years, I too could get caught up in this. I mean, this is absolutely ludicrous.

A member interjected.

Sheena WATT: I am very happy to declare that my dead dad one time knew someone at the pub who at one time was a member of a bikie gang. If this bill goes through, I could not work in construction. So this is absolutely ridiculous and I condemn this bill. It is reckless, it is unnecessary, it is a complete overreach and it undermines hardworking Victorians. I cannot believe that –

A member interjected.

Sheena WATT: It is not an integrity bill. This is a bill that takes away the livelihoods of many thousands of Victorian workers.

We have zero tolerance for bullying and for corruption in Victoria and we are determined to root out this toxic culture. That is why we have got the reviews that we have moved, including an independent review led by Mr Greg Wilson to enhance the authority of Victorian government bodies involved with construction companies and construction unions. It will enable them to respond to these allegations of criminal or unlawful conduct in the Victorian construction sector. The federal government has confirmed that the Fair Work Ombudsman will review all enterprise agreements made by the Victorian branch of the union’s construction division that apply to Victorian projects, ensuring their integrity has not been compromised by the acts of a small group of unionists behaving badly.

Even the CFMEU has taken the initiative to support an independent expert Geoffrey Watson SC to conduct a review of the allegations. As a director of the Centre for Public Integrity and someone with extensive experience in handling cases involving wrongdoing and corruption, he is one of the most respected experts in integrity and anti-corruption in the country. The truth is that on this side and within the union movement we are making sincere and concerted efforts to bring about meaningful change and progress.

By contrast, those opposite along with their friends in Canberra tried to dismantle the union movement through a royal commission led by disgraced judge Dyson Heydon, and this multimillion-dollar inquiry had the sole objective of exploiting the extensive resources and powers of a royal commission to weaken the union movement. That royal commission had the power and the authority to tap phones, investigate bank transactions and interview witnesses, but it was evident that the focus of it was more about political attacks on the CFMEU, the union movement and Australian workers as a whole. We all remember what came out of that royal commission. Our government’s actions reflect a commitment to genuine reform, allowing our Big Build projects and workers to continue building the projects that Victoria and Victorians of the future need and ensuring at the same time a work environment free from bullying and corruption.

Let me just tell you that there are 20,000 hardworking Victorians on construction sites that may be sent home without a job. That is not how we have built so much infrastructure over the last decade. I have met, through the Y and the work of the Bridge, so many young fellas that got a start in the construction industry after, you know, running off the rails a bit. I think about them. Now they can support their families, their loved ones and their kids – their parents sometimes. I have met many of

these young fellas through the work I used to do, and I tell you what, they would be absolutely devastated to learn that we are not supporting a second chance for them.

It would mean abandoning critical road and rail projects that are essential for getting Victorians home sooner and safer. Those opposite would willingly see some of the state's most pressing projects discarded, all in a bid to score some political points, and I am not having it. Unlike those opposite, we are not rushing to take action without due consideration; we are waiting for the findings and recommendations from Greg Wilson's interim report, due on 29 August 2024. It will be here before we know it, with the final report expected on 29 November 2024. Only after careful consideration of these recommendations will we decide how we might impact our infrastructure agenda in Victoria while continuing first and foremost to foster a safe, bullying-free and corruption-free work environment on our state's largest construction projects.

Ensuring safety is our top priority as we undertake the most ambitious infrastructure agenda in our state's history. Everyone on our state's worksites is responsible for maintaining safety, and we require everyone onsite, regardless of their position, to adhere to OH&S standards and comply with Commonwealth industrial relations laws. We will not take advice from the Liberal and National parties, who had nearly a decade in Canberra and failed to address these issues. Our government is absolutely committed to meaningful reform that will address real problems, rather than pushing poorly conceived bills for political gain. Industrial relations falls under the purview of our contractors. We expect all our contracting partners to follow the law, including compliance with the federal government's IR laws. Unfounded accusations of unlawful activity should not be aired under the protection of privilege here in this place. If there is evidence of illegal actions, those claims need to be brought before the Commonwealth courts and the tribunals that oversee industrial relations in our country, like the Fair Work Commission. When allegations of misconduct have been raised by members of our government, they have been referred to the appropriate department or agency for investigation.

I need to take a moment to acknowledge the real and very present dangers in construction work. Construction workers in our state perform a dangerous and vital job. They are delivering the benefits of the Big Build for all Victorians, and any and every worker deserves union representatives who prioritise their safety and are committed to it for the right reasons. It is unacceptable that this critical and dangerous work has been undermined by corrupt or criminal behaviour, and you know what, we are tackling it head on. However, we are not interested in supporting bills that would erode workers' rights to self-organise and defend their material interests.

We are committed to the smooth operation of Victorian worksites, because the Big Build has provided employment and training opportunities for thousands of Indigenous workers and Aboriginal-owned small businesses across the projects. I do want to talk about that. These are people that I know and have supported. More than 5 million hours have been worked by Indigenous people on our projects, and over \$116 million has been invested into Aboriginal owned and operated businesses. Our contracts also include targets for Indigenous employment. This has been a key aspect of our Big Build, demonstrating our commitment to empowering Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians and supporting our self-determination work as we step forward on the path towards treaty.

The presence of Indigenous firms in the Big Build is because our government mandated it in our contracting. Others have focused on tearing down Indigenous firms for their own political motivations, but we are absolutely committed to Aboriginal businesses. We stand firm in creating record-level Indigenous employment on government projects and remain absolutely steadfast and committed, and we are immensely proud of it. The apprentices that I have met onsite – on many, many sites I have got to tell you – are good fellows that deserve a second chance. These projects give them that second chance, and this bill would take it away.

The Big Build, through all the work built by folks enjoying a second chance, enables Victorians to get home sooner and get home safer. It is also making a significant difference in keeping Victorians

employed. Currently there are over 17,000 Victorians employed on Victoria's Big Build. That is a massive number. For every 100 jobs on the Big Build there are approximately 200 more that are supported through the supply chain, and at peak construction the Big Build is expected to support around 50,000 direct and indirect jobs. More than 277 million hours have been worked across the Big Build so far, and thanks to our local content and social procurement policies, which I am a pretty staunch supporter of, nearly 9 million hours have been logged by trainees, apprentices and cadets and more than 5 million hours have been worked by Aboriginal people on the Big Build. That is an extraordinary number, one that I will repeat many, many times to as many people who will hear it. That is 5 million hours that have been worked by Aboriginal people on the Big Build.

Victorians know that only the Allan Labor government will deliver the hundreds of projects under the Big Build. This includes the Suburban Rail Loop, which will help reshape how our city grows in the coming decades. It will better connect Victorians to jobs, retail, education, health services and each other, becoming critical when our city reaches 9 million people in the 2050s. It will be here before we know it, and that is why we have got to do the investment now to get the city ready for the many, many more that will call Victoria home. It will also create thousands of jobs and new homes around the SRL precincts, with SRL East, which is from Cheltenham to Box Hill, expected to deliver 70,000 new homes for Victorians. If you oppose the SRL, you are against jobs, better public transport and more homes in the right places. We will not allow this bold investment project to be overshadowed by the alleged actions of a small number of bad apples. This is part of the reason we are creating increased powers to tackle crime associated with organised crime outfits, and you will see that bill before us in this place before long.

A clear example of this, can I just let you know, is the introduction of the firearm prohibition orders granting police the power to conduct warrantless searches of anyone subject to an FPO. Violating these FPOs, these firearm prohibition orders, carries a maximum sentence of 10 years, and since the scheme's inception police have issued more than 2300 of these FPOs to violent offenders, serious youth offenders, outlaw motorcycle gangs, crime groups and counterterrorism persons of interest. We introduced legislation earlier this year to strengthen this scheme, making it easier for police to serve FPOs to evading offenders. The Chief Commissioner of Police has described FPOs as a game changer in the police's ability to respond to serious and organised crime – laws that those on the other side of the house have attempted to weaken. I will not have it. We have also established the illicit firearms unit to combat gun-related crime, and this unit frequently collaborates with other agencies to prevent the importation and trafficking of firearms.

Additionally, as part of a new bill passed by this Parliament in July, authorities can now target senior crime figures who play a key role in moving money and property and plan crimes by exploiting underlings while they reap the financial benefits. Under these changes, criminals must now prove that they acquired their wealth through legitimate means or face losing it entirely, and I recall some very strong contributions from this side of the house on that bill. The act now grants Victoria Police and the Director of Public Prosecutions additional powers to disrupt organised crime. Authorities can already confiscate wealth that police and the DPP believe has been illegally acquired. However, these existing pathways depend on the person having the wealth on them or a direct link to criminal activity, such as owning or having a controlling interest in an expensive house or car in their name. I think it was called the unexplained wealth bill if I remember correctly, Mr Berger.

John Berger: Correct.

Sheena WATT: Thank you for that. The act introduces a third pathway for authorities, called an unexplained wealth order, for example. If police believe an asset in a partner's name was purchased with proceeds from crime, they can seize it. We are taking real action on organised crime, and the changes will for the first time also capture consumable wealth and wealth that has been gifted, disposed of or expended, such as the hiring of a yacht or a hotel penthouse or even adult services.

Can I just say, compared to the interventions that have already been launched by the government, this bill is a pretty deplorable excuse for legislation, and its sole purpose is to attack hardworking union members in Victoria and obstruct our simply transformative Big Build projects. I can see right through those opposite and their embarrassing attempts to introduce these draconian restrictions on personal relationships, working conditions and second chances for the people that need them most.

Also I cannot support a bill that contains so much nastiness and anti-union sentiment. I absolutely oppose this bill. I am very happy to say that I cannot support this bill for the people that I know that are out there on these major sites, getting a second chance as apprentices and as trainees, supported by organisations like Jesuit Social Services and others – those that started their career through free TAFE – who have seen a big, bright future for them and decided that, you know what, that is what they deserve and that is a future that they can grasp with both hands, and they have done it time and time again. For those young ones, for the folks that a long time ago, way in the distant past, might have done a wrong thing but cleaned up their life and got it together, I say I cannot support this bill. Good unions and good union organisers are doing the right thing and are absolutely committed to safety onsite and are absolutely committed to making sure that people come home safe from their job each and every day in one of the most dangerous industries that exist in our state. It is not an exaggeration to say that. These are folks that deserve people in their corner that are absolutely committed to making sure that they come home safe each and every day.

Thank you to those organisers that work in safety in our union movement. I was amongst you. I was a rank-and-file health and safety representative. I was a union organiser in health and safety, and I will stand each and every day for the safety of our workers onsite, on the way to work or on the way home. Anyone that has ever gone to a worker's memorial service in our state will tell you that it is a troubling and dangerous industry, construction. For so many of those lives, as their names are rung out – the work that they have done and the site that they have worked; we all know it – we need to take that moment to say that they deserve a union that has their very best interests at heart, and that is why we have taken all the extraordinary steps we have to clean up the CFMEU. I and many of us here are looking forward to the review by Greg Wilson, coming at the end of this month, the interim review, and then the full review at the end of the year as well as a suite of changes and investigations that are being led by IBAC, Victoria Police and our friends in Canberra.

This is a bill that I cannot support. Having already reviewed it through the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee, I cannot even start on what it means for people with spent convictions. As someone who spoke on it and has a deep and clear commitment to people getting a second chance, it is not a bill that will ever be supported by me.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (10:59): I am really pleased to rise and show my support and the Nationals' support for this private members bill that has been put forward by my colleague Evan Mulholland, and I say of course the Nationals support this bill entirely. In my contribution I would like to unpack a number of elements of this bill: why it is needed and what Victorians are being robbed of by this Labor government. I will correct some of the story time that we have heard today, some of the fantasy discussions that we heard from the previous speaker for the Labor Party. I will do that and put on record the truth rather than the embellished, I would say, rant which is just so far from the truth of what this bill actually does and will do for the people of Victoria.

This bill is not just necessary, it is certainly long overdue. It is time to take the gloves off and confront the thuggery and criminal activity on taxpayer-funded worksites. What we know is that for many people out there this whole discussion around unionism, around the CFMEU and around the bosses that are creaming taxpayer-funded projects, is a theoretical one. It does not impact them clearly and directly. But what they do understand is what is not being built in their regions, what is going missing from construction in their spaces, in their towns and in their communities.

The presence of organised crime on CFMEU-run, taxpayer-funded Big Build projects is at least partially responsible for this outrageous \$40 billion in cost blowouts on our major infrastructure

projects. Let us unpack some of those. We know, over and above, these are blowouts; these are past the contingency and on to the pain barrier. In the Big Build we have got the North East Link – \$21 billion in cost blowouts. We have the West Gate Tunnel – \$4.7 billion in cost blowouts. This is ‘billion’ with a B. The Metro Tunnel – \$4 billion over and above the costed project. Level crossings – over \$3.3 billion. Forty billion dollars.

Let me tell you what we are not getting built in regional Victoria. We are not getting built infrastructure for the Kilmore bypass. We are not getting built the Traralgon bypass, even though there was planning money in the past for it. It is just lying dead on the table. We are being robbed. Roads – let me talk about some of the roads that are in a most abominable state. It is not me saying this; this is the RACV response. The Bass Highway, Princes Highway, Phillip Island Road – our roads across the board are shocking.

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, I would love to talk about the investment the government is making in the eastern region, but on relevance to the bill, I think the member should come back to it.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I will uphold the point of order and bring the member back to the content of the bill.

Melina BATH: Let us talk about Marty Albert, a senior Bandidos bikie enforcer who was appointed as a union organiser on major Victorian government construction projects. Let us talk about this enforcer that remained in his role after being charged with violent assault. Let us talk about how in 2019 the Premier’s friend the disgraced CFMEU boss John Setka was exposed for his deep ties to bikie gangs such as the Hells Angels and the Comanchero outlaw bikie gangs. Let us talk about Mick Gatto. Let us talk about the multiple ways that the CFMEU tax is driving up construction costs, turning the Big Build into big blowouts. Meanwhile our schools, our hospitals and our public transport system are being starved of the funds that they desperately need. They want to shut us down from talking about the issues that are affecting real Victorians, not lining the pockets of bikie gangs and CFMEU bosses.

This Government Construction Projects Integrity Bill 2024, this bikie bill, introduces critical provisions to stop this from happening. It mandates criminal history checks, a normal and valid process that employees for the public sector and many other areas undergo as a matter of course. It excludes people with convictions or pending charges for organised crime offences – not the lines that were being fed by the previous speaker in this house. It excludes people with known associations to organised crime – established on the advice of the Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police – from taxpayer-funded worksites. These are commonsense, rational and appropriate actions that need to be taken.

We urge people in this house, including the crossbenchers – because clearly the government is hiding, ducking and weaving on the Wilson report, which is going to be tabled sometime in November. Whenever I hear these sorts of things, I picture the movie with Harrison Ford where they say, ‘We’ve got this particular item, and it is going to be safely put away,’ and then they scan to this vast warehouse and somewhere in that vast warehouse is a valuable document or a valuable artefact or whatever. That is what I see is going to happen here: they are going to take that Wilson report, they are going to shelve it somewhere, they are going to lock the door and they are not going to act –

Richard Welch interjected.

Melina BATH: Correct. They are not going to actually act to remove these people from worksites. We heard from the previous speaker as well defending the workers and their rights. It was very heartfelt, and I appreciate her comments about the illustrative example of the death of an Indigenous worker from that worksite. They are the people that this government and Victoria should be supporting and caring for, and they should be ensuring that this sort of terrible, tragic outcome does not happen. Some of the blame for that has to be laid on the union thugs and union bosses. Some of the blame for

this has to be laid on the bikies that infiltrate the system and use it as their cash cow. And they do it with impunity – they act with impunity. I have had an example in my region of Eastern Victoria where a local construction company applied for a tender, got the tender and then was harassed and harassed and harassed constantly over the most nitpicky marginal things to the point that the bank overdraft – the union controlled their payments and stopped them working, so they had to keep paying their workers but they could not actually receive any funds – was in dire condition and their house was coming under pressure. I have talked to his wife, and this person said he was absolutely near breaking point, with a shocking outcome. I will actually put this on record.

Members interjecting.

Melina BATH: The previous speaker's were fictitious. These are real cases – absolute cases. Let me discuss some of the topics that were raised in the previous speaker's discussion of the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee and her discussion and story time of the X, Y and Z that could occur. Let me provide some context.

I thank Mr Evan Mulholland for responding to SARC's letter inquiring about further delving into the bill, so let me just explain some of the things that this bill actually does. It balances carefully the rights of individuals and the need to protect public safety and maintain integrity on government projects. There is a novelty: integrity on government projects. The temporary restriction of employment for those pending charges is appropriate and essential to prevent organised crime from undermining public trust. The bill's restriction on employing individuals convicted of organised crime offences, as outlined in clause 6 of the bill – Mr Mulholland will go into this in further detail – is a justified limitation on the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, and that was part of SARC's concern. The bill mirrors existing legislation, an act that is in existence today called the Criminal Organisations Control Act 2012. The bill prioritises project integrity. This is some word that they use. They slap it on like Vegemite on a bit of toast, but it has to hold up in this state. Clause 6(2) of the bill ensures that the safety and integrity of government construction projects take precedence over the Spent Convictions Act 2021. This is a targeted response to serious risks proposed by organised crime. The bill does not – I repeat, not – repeal the Spent Convictions Act but operates within a specific context where the public interest demands a higher level of scrutiny.

The other point that is very important to clarify to clear the record after what we heard before is that the major contracts have to be requested through the Chief Commissioner of Police. He or she can make that decision about the release and respect of individual rights. Also, the sharing of personal information is strictly confined; it is absolutely there to protect people.

We heard from the previous speaker a whole lot of nonsense. It is important for this community of Victorians to know about this \$40 billion in cost blowouts and the percentage that is that cream, that gold, that ends up in the pockets of CFMEU bosses and bikie gang bosses who are controlling people. I take a point of the previous speaker. They talk about defending the rights of workers, but they are not protecting the rights of workers. It is absolutely an indictment on this government that the Premier today has been the minister in charge of those Big Build projects that are costing Victorians an eye-watering amount: \$25 million a day, in the forward estimates, in interest alone. What would that mean for people who need workers in their regions, need teachers, need nurses, need doctors – all of those? What would that mean?

These people over here do not want to hear about the issues that are vitally affecting people in my patch, because it does not look good on the slate. The Nationals support this bill. Unless you are actually going to come forward and come on this journey to protect workers, to clean out the thuggery element, to clean out the corruption in the workplace, then you are part of the problem – you are not part of the solution.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (11:14): I rise to speak on behalf of the Greens on the Government Construction Projects Integrity Bill 2024. This bill obviously comes in the wake of recent

allegations of corruption, intimidation and the presence of organised crime figures on Victorian government building sites. While the Greens certainly share the widespread concern about the content of these allegations, it is important to situate these claims and the bill's proposed response within the broader context of the building and construction industry, the union movement and the safety of Victorian workers. In doing so, even if investigations find that the recent allegations are true, this bill would not be an appropriate response. Rather than effectively rooting out corruption and keeping building sites safe, this bill is a blunt instrument. At first glance the emphasis on organised crime and limitation to major government projects may seem like a reasonable way to protect workers and taxpayers in the wake of the recent allegations, but scratch the surface and it becomes clear that this bill would inflict a lot of damage without necessarily addressing the corruption it purports to prevent. As I said, it is a blunt tool, and it is unlikely to achieve its intended aims. There are likely many unintended consequences. It is also premature to enact legislation when there are investigations that have only just begun, and we do not yet know what they will find or what they will recommend.

The reality is that this bill would mostly hurt workers. It would exclude many people from decent, well-paying union jobs, not only anyone with a past conviction – which appears not to be time limited, so it could be decades in the past – but anyone with even a pending charge. If we flatter ourselves that we are a modern, decent society, then people with a history in the justice system should be able to get a second chance and earn a good wage in a safe environment. Politicians should not take that away for the sake of getting a few points over the government of the day. This bill goes further. It does not only exclude those who are directly charged or convicted but also prevents from working anyone who has at any time been associated with someone who is a member, a former member or a prospective member of a declared organisation or who has even been seen wearing a patch or insignia associated with a declared criminal organisation. In theory someone could be barred from a decent job because they were photographed 30 years ago with an acquaintance wearing their sibling's jacket.

Imagine if we decided to pass similar legislation to apply to the people sitting here in this chamber. Imagine if we booted out anyone who had ever been in any way connected to a politician who had ever acted in a corrupt manner or accepted kickbacks or who had so much as worn the party insignia of someone who had. I think we know that there would be a whole lot of empty chairs in this place. That is not to say we should turn a blind eye to corruption and scandal, whether in politics, on building sites or anywhere else. On the contrary, the Greens have been doing all we can to get this government to fix Victoria's anti-corruption system. In the last sitting week the Greens in the other place moved to reintroduce our bill to strengthen IBAC by broadening the definition of what constitutes corrupt conduct, bringing our IBAC into line with other jurisdictions, including our federal National Anti-Corruption Commission. This was unfortunately voted down by the government along with other integrity measures we proposed that week, like stronger government committees. The lack of commitment to integrity that we see from this government continues to be disappointing, but the bill before us is not the way to fix it.

Rather than creating reactive legislation, all of us in this place should be working together in a genuine effort to root out corruption wherever it is found, including within unions but certainly not limited to that space. The Greens support the strength and autonomy of the union movement, and we recognise that corruption weakens unions and betrays the workers that they represent. The government's role is not to undermine unions or to bar everyday people from working on job sites but instead to strengthen our structures of workplace safety and ensure that we have adequate whistleblower protections in place so that people feel safe to speak out when something is not right.

We should also question why there is a perceived need for so-called tough guys in positions of power within the union. We have heard that for some workers this type of union leadership lends a certain sense of protection from elements that they perceive to be even worse, namely profit-hungry developers and company bosses, who would not make workplace safety a priority unless they were forced to. This government is not exactly known for holding property developers to account. The role of the government should not be to undermine unions or to bar workers from sites but to make sure

that any company on the payroll is treating their workers safely and fairly and that Victoria has strong protections in place to protect workers if this does not happen. Like many in this place and around Victoria, the Greens are concerned about the serious allegations that have been recently aired around corruption, intimidation and organised crime infiltration of construction sites, including on Victorian government projects. We do not believe that this bill is the right path to take, and therefore we will not be supporting it today.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:19): I also rise to make a contribution on the Government Construction Projects Integrity Bill 2024. I will state at the outset that the government opposes this bill. The bill is misguided, and we have just had the benefit of listening to a number of contributions in the chamber today, and a number of speakers have actually pointed out where things are at odds with reality. The bill purports to urgently remedy everything. It purports to say that there is a massive problem, that they have got the solution to all of this and that there has been no consultation. There has been no assessment of whether these reforms put up by the other side will have unintended consequences. They have not even factored in the fact that these reforms, proposed by those opposite, may not even be constitutionally or legally valid. This is what happens when those opposite try to put bills through the Parliament. They are rushed, they are poorly thought through and they do not bear any semblance of or reflect on the reality of the situation. It is actually legislation cloaked in wanting to kick the guts out of the union movement and workers. That is what this is really about.

I noted Ms Bath was selectively quoting from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulation Committee report – a committee of which I am a member – so I am going to go to what SARC actually decided in a moment to correct the record. I am pleased to be speaking in opposition to this bill as an actual union official – somebody who has actually worked as a union official and who knows how the union movement actually works – rather than having Tories over there projecting rubbish onto us, as if they know everything there is to know about the movement. We know what those opposite are like – they hate workers, they will always kick workers in the guts and they will always take every opportunity they can to tear down the union movement.

Let us talk about the reality of this in terms of what the Allan Labor government has actually done. I have spoken about this before, and I have to keep talking about it because obviously the message does not resonate with those opposite. They do not want to listen because what they want is an opportunity to use this as a political football. The Premier established an independent review into Victoria's construction sector. The review will look at how we can strengthen powers of bodies which are engaged with construction companies and unions to respond to allegations of criminal or unlawful conduct. The Premier has also referred allegations of serious misconduct to Victoria Police and the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission. We are also toughening anti-bikie laws to make it easier for police and the courts to prevent certain individuals from associating with each other, with a bill to be introduced to our Parliament in August. I am going to come back to that point when I go to the SARC report, because obviously the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee – that is what SARC stands for – which I am a member of looks at the legislation before the Parliament. We have got a job to do in terms of assessing whether the charter of human rights is impacted and whether anyone's human rights are impacted as a consequence of the bill. And, guess what, there are some serious consequences, and I want to make sure I put those on the record.

To proceed with the opposition's bill today would be to bulldoze in supposed reforms that will allegedly fight corruption and organised crime, without any considerations for the broader implications or even workability. Where is the assessment of operability? Has the opposition actually engaged with Victoria Police and the broader construction groups? Every time we put a bill through the Parliament here, we hear lots of catcalls of 'Who did you consult with?' I do not think the opposition have consulted with anybody on this bill, because, as I said, it beggars belief. I do not think they have consulted with Victoria Police or the construction groups or even the union movement. Consultation is a pretty important factor in any bill that you might put before the Parliament. Will these reforms

create an inoperable regulatory burden on the same people the bill is purporting to support? Who is going to police this? Who is actually going to go through and check every person who works on a construction project? Under the reforms that this bill proposes, who is going to be policing this, and at what cost? Who is going to pay for it? The taxpayer? How are you going to fund it? These are things that they have not thought about over there. It does not occur to them, because they have never been in government. Can you just imagine if they were in government. What a chaos-filled –

A member interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Exactly – rabble.

I will talk shortly about what the SARC report said, because, again, where is the legal advice about whether these reforms are even lawful? Are they even lawful? Like I said, are these reforms even constitutionally valid? We know that the legislation and industrial relations space is fraught, because industrial relations is a Commonwealth responsibility as well. We may very well be wasting our time here. What I would like to say is: we are wasting our time here, but hey, it is okay, because it is wacky Wednesday, and here we are. We are debating a bill that is completely toothless and is legally invalid. But do not let that stop you over there, because it is your day. You can bowl up any garbage you like today because it is your day.

But we on this side know that the development of significant and complex reforms takes time and it requires finesse, engagement, consultation and detailed consideration to reduce to the greatest extent possible any unintended consequences. Again, I ask you the question: who is going to do this? If you introduce these reforms, who is going to go through everyone's processes, and at what cost? Which government department is going to do it, or is it going to be? I know – you would contract it out to a private company. That is what they would do, and they would charge exorbitant amounts of money to do it. Again your rich mates would profit, because you do not like the public, you do not like the public service, you do not like the word 'public' at all. You hate it.

Let us talk about how the bill would operate. Again, I know, Mr Mulholland, you are on the record talking about giving people second chances, but this bill does not give anyone even a first chance. It gives people no chances. If I go to the specifics, Mr Mulholland, in your second-reading speech you said you are a big believer in a second chance, but it is very hard to believe that you actually said that and stand by it because the bill, as it currently stands, in part 3 intends to punish you even if you have reformed. This bill would stop you from earning an honest living in construction. Mr Mulholland has had the cheek to suggest that he is a big believer in second chances while at the same time putting up a bill that will perpetually punish you for the things you have done in the past or even if you might know somebody who may have done something in the past.

Let us talk about what the SARC report has said, because we had Ms Bath selectively quoting what the SARC report says. Under 'Trespasses unduly upon rights and freedoms – Presumption of innocence' there is a practice note. It says:

Clause [6(1)(c)] prohibits the Crown from entering into a major construction contract *unless* the contract requires each party to ensure that any person employed or engaged for the contract, does not have a pending criminal charge related to organised crime.

The whole point about having a court process, Mr Mulholland, is so that you have the opportunity to respond to criminal charges. The Crown puts their case against you, you have a defence counsel or barrister then to help you put your defence. The court then decides whether you are guilty of a crime. What SARC did when they looked at this was they noted that the statement of compatibility with the charter of human rights says:

The Bill seeks to impose obligations on parties to certain construction contracts entered into by or on behalf of the Crown, and on registered ... organisations, to ensure that certain persons are not employed or engaged for the purposes of the contracts.

It talks about ensuring that any person engaged or employed for the purposes of a contract does not have a criminal history related to organised crime, has no pending criminal charges of this nature and is not a member or associate of a declared criminal organisation. How and what test are you going to implement to make it work? Let us just have a look at that again: 'is not a member or associate of a declared criminal organisation'. Who is going to make that decision? On what evidence or information? Is it going to be a public servant? Is it going to be a court process? This bill raises more questions than it answers. Who could it be?

There are serious procedural fairness concerns about this bill, in fact, to the extent that these provisions engage human rights such as the right to privacy, freedom of association and the presumption of innocence. There is a really critically important one. Do not forget about the presumption of innocence. These rights may be subject to reasonable limitations under section 7 of the charter, but again the specific safeguards and procedural fairness requirements mentioned in the statement of compatibility may not be expressly included in this bill. The question remains: does it have a direct impact on the presumption of innocence of a relevant individual's criminal proceedings before a court? Wow. That is pretty significant, I would have thought.

I have 5 minutes left. I will not have enough time to get to all of it so I might just jump to the end part, but I think I have gone to what the major concerns are. As I said, we want to take away individuals' rights to procedural fairness even if they know somebody – they might have known somebody when they were 18 and had a boyfriend or someone they knew many years ago. But if you want to work in construction now, the mere whiff of the fact that you might have known somebody in your past who may or may not have gone on to do things that they may have faced proceedings for and may or may not have been found guilty of means you are out too. You are out for the mere fact that you have associated with somebody. I am going to go to what the conclusion was, and there are some interesting concerns particularly around the Spent Convictions Act 2021. I will just touch on that for a moment. I mean, the SARC report is gold. I thoroughly encourage everybody in the chamber to actually read the SARC report.

John Berger interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Yes, I do not think they read it, to be honest. I actually encourage everyone in this chamber to read the SARC report. It is pretty important, because it even raises concerns around spent convictions. I will go to the overall conclusion. I will just touch on this and then come back to the conclusions. The report says:

Spent conviction discrimination – Privacy – Request by party to major construction contract or registered organisation – Victoria police must provide criminal history and information appearing to indicate membership of named organisations

Wow. Again, this is what the committee said. In the report it says:

Clause 4(2)(a) excludes 'a conviction that becomes spent under a law of another jurisdiction'. A 'member' includes 'an individual whose conduct in relation to the organisation would reasonably lead another person to consider the individual to be a member of the organisation'.

Wow. That is 'reasonably lead another person to consider' – not even conclude – 'the individual to be a member of the organisation'. The report continues:

A 'criminal organisation' is one of 28 organisations listed by name in Schedule 1. There is no definition of 'associate'.

The Committee observes that the effect of clauses 7 and 8 may be that Victoria Police must, upon request, provide a party to certain contracts and the committee of management of certain registered organisations with every recorded conviction, finding of guilt and pending charge of a person under any Australian law, and any information known to Victoria police that appears to indicate that a person is a member, former member or prospective member of various named organisations or an associate of such a person ...

How are we going to find this information out? Who is going to find it and from what source? Is it credible? Honestly, this is fantasy stuff. In the conclusion of the SARC report, it says:

The Committee will write to the member –

and I look forward to the response –

seeking further information as to:

- whether the definition of ‘major construction contract’ in clause 3 and the dealings with land described in new section 83A of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* are limited to major contracts or dealings
- whether the definition of ‘criminal history’ in clause 4 is limited to offences that are relevant to clause 6 or new section 83A of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004*
- how the Bill ensures that any person whose rights may be affected by clauses 7 and 8 is provided with procedural fairness –

pretty important –

- the compatibility of clauses 7 and 8 with the Charter’s rights against discrimination on the basis of a spent conviction.

As you can see, what an utter shemozzle – it is disgraceful. Mr Mulholland professes to believe that people should have second chances, but under this bill anybody who wants a second chance – and construction work so often provides people with second chances to repair their life, to move on from any wrongdoing and to start again. Rehabilitation is what it is about. But of course those opposite just talk hot air. It is hot air over there, because again, anybody who might think that they can restart their life under those opposite would not have that chance. And who is going to decide this? Who is going to be the arbiter? What information are we going to collect and from whom? Are you going to ask the bikie gang, ‘Oh, did anyone actually have a conversation with you?’ Is that reliable? And what is the process for admitting people to being a member? I do not know. It is crazy stuff – lunacy.

Again, this is an attack on workers. This is an attack on the union movement. Our government, the Allan Labor government, has taken strong action to ensure that we stamp out any rotten culture in the union movement. This bill is a joke, and it should be roundly, resoundingly rejected by everyone in this chamber.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (11:34): I rise today to speak in support of the Government Construction Projects Integrity Bill 2024. The bill is designed to uphold the integrity and safety of our workforce in Victorian government projects, ensuring that organised crime figures and those with close connections to organised crime are locked out of major government project contracts, but it has also exposed the rot that has festered under the Allan Labor government. The Government Construction Projects Integrity Bill 2024 would set a barrier against the rampant criminality this government has allowed to thrive on taxpayer-funded worksites. Victorians are being robbed. Under the watch of the CFMEU there has festered an environment of corruption and criminality on government-run projects. Victorians deserve better. Transparency, accountability and ethical conduct must be restored. This is not about attacking workers rights, as those across the chamber have mentioned. It is about addressing corruption and bullying, and it is anti-bikies, to ensure the rights of ordinary workers on job sites are protected. It is about supporting workers on worksites and giving them the right to a safe workplace.

Every single one of us is paying the price for this disgraceful mismanagement that the Allan Labor government has permitted. Higher taxes, ballooning state debts and dodgy deals: this is what Labor has gifted us. The budget has blown out by a whopping \$40 billion on projects, as we have experienced so far. Make no mistake, this is not just incompetence. Criminal elements have been permitted not just to survive but to thrive on major projects funded by the Victorian people. If you look closely at every single major project under this Labor government, it has blown out, not in the millions but in the billions of dollars. In every major project under Premier Allan, whether as the Premier or as the

minister responsible for the state's major projects, we have seen project blowouts. How much, we ask, of this has fallen into the hands of criminal bikie gangs? It is time we managed Victorian taxpayers dollars carefully, like we plan our family budgets. The Big Build is compromised, and it is high time we cleaned up taxpayer-funded construction sites.

This bill would prevent members, former members and prospective members of criminal organisations from taking on government contracts. This includes notorious gangs such as the Bandidos, the Hells Angels, the Muslim Brotherhood movement, the Coffin Cheaters and others alike. We have witnessed shocking cases of parachuting bikie members into senior positions, like Tyrone Bell – also known as 'Little Ty' – a former senior Mongol bikie who rose to CFMEU delegate position, earning over \$200,000, and Sammy 'The Turk' Erkan, a Hells Angel involved in workplace disputes. This must end.

In 2019 the Premier's friend and disgraced former CFMEU boss John Setka was exposed for his deep ties to bikie gangs such as the Hells Angels and the Comanchero outlaw motorcycle gangs. These are the connections of a man who should have never had the ear of the Premier, let alone been allowed to run rampant on construction worksites funded by taxpayers money. Fast-forward to 2021 and we see Mick Gatto, Melbourne's underworld figurehead, allegedly mediating disputes between the CFMEU and construction companies. Mr Gatto's alleged involvement is a blatant indicator of just how deep the criminal rot has set in on all these CFMEU construction worksites.

I know those across the chamber have mentioned the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee and that we on this side of the chamber have not responded. I just want to let the chamber know that my colleague Mr Evan Mulholland has contacted SARC in response to the report. In very, very deep detail his letter has addressed the presumption-of-innocence concern, clause 6(1)(c), and it goes into greater detail in relation to the employment and engagement of individuals. It also addresses the interactions of the Spent Convictions Act 2021 in clause 6(2) and inserts a new section 83A in the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004. It also goes on to address freedom of association.

John Berger: Give us the details.

Trung LUU: I will submit that letter, if I am allowed, to the chamber. I have the full details here with me – all the questions which Mr Mulholland has addressed to SARC in his response. I will make it available right now, if I am permitted to. This is in response to Mr Berger's request.

John Berger: I asked you to read it out.

Trung LUU: I will make it available for you to read. It is quite detailed.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Is leave granted for Mr Luu to table the document?

Leave refused.

Trung LUU: You do not want it? You asked me for the full details – it is three or four pages – and you do not want us to table it. You do not want it. You asked for it. It is full of detail for you to read, but you do not want it. Okay. This is what we are dealing with. I will go on with my response.

There was mention of support for workers. I would like to mention in relation to this that this bill is actually supporting not only those with past experiences but future workers on worksites. There was a very tragic incident in relation to bullying on worksites, which is what this bill is seeking to address. Ben Nash, a young man on the brink of adulthood, entered the construction industry with a dream of building a better future. Instead he faced the harsh reality where those in power made the rules, robbing him of dignity and leaving him in torment. His experience is not isolated. Our hope is that this bill will address and assist those who have experienced the same situations that Ben went through and prevent incidents like he experienced in the future. This reflects a system that fails to protect its most vulnerable members. We must be committed to a world where integrity is the foundation of our institutions, ensuring that no other dream is lost before its time. We have seen the devastating consequences of

corruption in the construction branch of the CFMEU, shown by the tragedy of Ben, an Indigenous man who was locked up and tormented and took his own life because of bullying. Enough is enough. We must get to the bottom of the CFMEU's actions and ensure that such behaviour is never tolerated again. People are suffering as we speak, at the moment, in silence. This bill will help address those issues. It will help those union member workers who are experiencing these incidents at the moment.

This year police uncovered that CFMEU shop stewards were receiving kickbacks from organised crime groups to facilitate drug trafficking on their own construction worksites. Why are we seeing such an increase in drug use on worksites? Because there is drug trafficking on worksites. The police have uncovered evidence of kickbacks from trafficking on worksites. This bill will address that as well. These are not just allegations, this is the reality of what is happening when the government turns a blind eye to criminality and continues to oppose these types of bills.

This bill opposes the real, ongoing threats of organised crime in Victorian government construction projects. It prioritises transparency, accountability and safety while carefully and respectfully balancing individuals' rights. The opposition strongly supports this bill as a necessary step to protect the integrity of our public works, ensuring Victorian government projects are free of criminal influence. This bill, the Government Construction Project Integrity Bill 2024, is a no-nonsense, zero-tolerance response to the rot which is festering under this government's watch. It will bar anyone with ties to organised crime from being involved in major construction projects. We are not asking for integrity, we on this side of the chamber are demanding, on behalf of Victorian people, that there should be and will be integrity on all sites.

In the amount of time I have left I would like to address why having a safe place to live, work and play is important. The CFMEU's ties to bikies is a tax on every Australian. With great power comes great responsibility. Inviting bikies into leadership roles is a betrayal of both workers and taxpayers. I just wonder whether the conflict of interest given the CFMEU's donations to MPs and the Labor Party has affected the government's reaction to this bill.

Clause 6 of the bill provides that government contracts must meet certain requirements. This clause mandates that major construction contracts must include provisions ensuring that individuals employed or engaged for the contract do not have a criminal history involving certain serious offences. Those offences are outlined in the bill: an organised crime offence and consorting with a person convicted of a serious crime offence. Clause 6 continues to talk about employment. We have seen intimidation tactics, such as masked men sent to builders' homes, pressuring them to sign enterprise bargaining agreements. This system intimidates and is designed to control honest tradespeople. We mentioned IBAC. The question is: why did IBAC not investigate this earlier? Because it has not got the power or the authority that this bill would provide.

This bill will carefully balance individuals' rights with the need to protect public safety and maintain integrity for the government's projects. In conclusion, this bill, on this side of the chamber, is a line in the sand. It is time to put an end to criminality, corruption and the sheer incompetence that plagues our construction industry under the Labor government.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (11:47): I rise to oppose this bill. While we see the circus going on in Canberra with Michaelia Cash trying to delay action, trying to delay intentions, we see the same thing here with this bill. Whilst the government responds in meaningful ways to ensure that our construction industry can continue to deliver the infrastructure that our city needs – that we continue to get on with building the housing that Victorians need – those opposite would prefer that tens of thousands of workers go home rather than go to work and get on with building what Victorians need. It would mean that we would be left without the critical road and rail infrastructure that we know this city and that this state absolutely needs to set us up for future generations

We have Greg Wilson, who will make his final report by 29 November. We know that this work is coming from someone who is highly respected. It is work that can be implemented. But those opposite

do not want to work to that. As is typical of the conservatives in this place, the National and Liberal coalition, everything is a kneejerk reaction. It is a thought bubble that has been drafted up by I do not know who but without engagement, without consultation, without thinking about the bigger picture – drafted up and rushed into Parliament to try and get a cheap, quick win.

We know that industrial relations is a matter for the Commonwealth. In fact for those opposite, some may recall Jeff Kennett referred that off to the Commonwealth. I believe Mr McCracken is very aware of the activities of Mr Kennett and the terrible things he did across this state in the regions.

Joe McCracken: I missed that; sorry.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes, you did miss that. Your party has missed the fact that Mr Kennett referred those laws. It is a federal issue.

That being what it is, this government is getting on with the referrals we have made. That opportunity is there for IBAC, for Victoria Police, and as I said before, for Greg Wilson. But those opposite do not want to see those avenues used. They do not want to use those avenues; they want to come in here. There was a contribution made just before about drug dealing on construction sites. I think the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry exposed a hell of a lot more drug use and drug dealing in our white-collar institutions than Heydon's royal commission, Heydon's politically driven and politically motivated attack on workers around this country. For the millions of dollars that were spent, for the time that was consumed, what did it turn up? This is what we see time and again from the National–Liberal coalition – that they want to go on political and ideological witch-hunts. That is what they will do. We know that they will work to lower the pay and the conditions of workers. Anyone old enough will remember WorkChoices and the Liberals' absolute drive to reduce the pay and conditions of workers. That is absolutely in their DNA.

This bill looks to bulldoze through with no consultation, no engagement. Things are flying across the other side of the chamber, because they know they are absolutely bringing in a bulldozer of a bill with no consultation and no engagement –

A member interjected.

Tom McINTOSH: It is business as usual for the coalition, that is exactly right, because there are not the values. There is not the development of policy. They bring in something and want to rush it through. There is no discussion, there is no detail about how it will work – what the regulatory burden will be or how it will be funded. We do not even know if it is lawful. At least over there you are consistent in bringing things to this place that are ill-conceived, are poorly put together and indeed waste a hell of a lot of our time, unfortunately.

We do know the impact this bill will have on people trying to get gainful employment, on people trying to provide for their families. This will be like a wrecking ball coming through in what is a dangerous industry. I often talk about the fact that those opposite have never set foot in a TAFE. I am pretty sure they have never set foot on a construction site. It is a dangerous industry. Ms Watt spoke earlier about when we remember annually the workers that have died across our state, the tragedies that have occurred. Whether it is those working on sites or when we have seen the public who have been injured and killed by unsafe construction standards, it is those workers and those families that are paying the ultimate price when corners are cut on safety. It ripples through communities. That does not even go to the amputations and injuries that stop people from being able to continue in their work.

It is critical that we have our workforce to deliver our major infrastructure investments in our roads and in our rail. We know that those opposite did not start one major transport infrastructure project in their four years. Dolittle and Nap Time were frozen, and it is the same National–Liberal coalition that have no values, no plans and no ability to be able to produce or deliver anything for this state, whereas we are seeing major projects being delivered – level crossing removals ahead of time and the Metro Tunnel ahead of time. These are going to unlock the economic productivity of this state for generations

to come. We have employed people on the way through, and we have trained apprentices and trained trainees, because we know that you lot, like when you scrapped the SEC, do not care about generations of workforce. There is no consideration, and again it comes back to no values, no policy. There is no consideration of a pipeline of workers. You need to ensure that pipeline continues so those that grow into their profession and master their skills can train the next generation so we see a continuity and a continual improvement on the skills and ability of our workforce here in Victoria.

When legislation has been brought forward – whether it is on industrial manslaughter, whether it is on wage theft, whether it is on portable long service leave or whether it is on engineered stone silicosis – it is something that is there to protect the health and wellbeing of workers and it is something to protect the income of workers and their families and our communities. We talk about values and believing that we want to see workers go home well paid at the end of the day so they can support their families and so that income is within our communities and supports our communities to thrive – unlike the beliefs, as I said, of the valueless, planless and policyless opposition, who are still dreaming of their days in student politics at uni, worshipping Reagan and Thatcher and whatever on earth those economic policies were.

I made mention in the last sitting – and I note that it was not those opposite – of their Liberal counterparts who could not even bring themselves to see minimum wage workers get a dollar more an hour, a simple recommendation to the Fair Work Commission. That was too much for you lot to stomach, because you do not want to see workers get even \$1 more. The reason why you lot come in here – we are about to go into question time – but cannot have a well-versed question is because you need your think tanks to write everything for you. It is okay if something breaks over the weekend, but if something happens in the moment, you sit there with your questions. You do not know which minister to ask; you do not know what to ask. You have got no idea unless your think tanks are sending it through on the fax machine to you, because you do not have the internet – you do not even believe in the science of the internet – so unless that is sent through to you –

David Davis: On a point of order, Acting President, he is diverging. He is now talking about think tanks and this and that, and it has nothing at all to do with the bill.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): There is no point of order. Mr McIntosh to continue for the remainder of the minute.

Tom McINTOSH: Following on from those major projects, we know what runs on those train lines and on those tramlines is built here by Victorians for Victorians. Again, I am sorry to come back to values and that lack of values, that lack of planning, that lack of policies you lot have, because again, you would just rather ship off the work to the lowest common denominator paid contract. You do not want to see that work being performed here, building the next pipeline of workers, the pipeline of workers that we have put the training and skills system around.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Members

Attorney-General

Absence

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:00): I rise to inform the house that for the purposes of question time today I will answer questions for the portfolios of Attorney-General and emergency services.

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The opposition would like an explanation as to where the second minister is.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I also inform the house that Minister Shing is delayed and that for the purposes of question time I can also take questions on behalf of her portfolios.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: It is all right; Minister Shing has just arrived.

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! Can we please just have some decorum for question time.

Michael Galea: On a point of order, Deputy President, I ask that Mr Davis retract his comments to Ms Shing.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Ms Shing is here. If she was offended, she can ask for a retraction.

Harriet Shing: On a point of order, Deputy President, Mr Davis's comments were offensive, and I ask that he unconditionally withdraw.

David Davis: I retract that the royal presence is here; I am happy to retract that.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Can we just have a retraction without qualification, please.

David Davis: I retract.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Housing

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:02): (613) My question is for the Minister for Housing, Minister Shing. Recent reports that the Victorian government has deferred 15 projects from the Big Housing Build that will no longer be built on state-owned land have rightfully distressed community and stakeholders. In response to these recent reports, the government said that it will seek funding from other streams, with community housing providers committing to build social and affordable homes to make up the shortfall. As it stands, these projects are all at different stages of delivery and some are under consideration for funding, but ultimately these changes bring into question the delivery timeline for this much-needed housing infrastructure. In a housing crisis, it has never been so important that these commitments are delivered in full and on time so more Victorians and their families can have a roof over their heads. My question is: how can the Victorian people have confidence that this government will deliver on its Big Housing Build as planned?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:03): Thank you, Ms Payne, for your question. The reporting that you refer to is actually really problematic because it is wrong. It is actually categorically incorrect. The projects that you referred to, on these sites, will be delivered, and that has been made really clear. I can confirm here on my feet, as I have confirmed in other forums and as I have discussed with local members and with members of the community, these projects are going ahead. There are a number of projects in what has been reported which were not within the scope of the Big Housing Build. However, the Big Housing Build is one of a number of areas of funding which are about making sure that we can continue to deliver housing across the state. So the idea that if funding is not coming from the Big Housing Build bucket – that \$5.3 billion – homes are not being built is fanciful. It is ridiculous and it is wrong.

What I will say is that there will be homes built at the sites that have been referred to. I can guarantee that families and couples and individuals who will eventually be able to call these places home will not care if the funding has come from the Big Housing Build, if it has come from the Regional Housing Fund or if it has come from the Social Housing Growth Fund or the Housing Australia Future Fund. We are determined to continue to deliver on providing housing to people who need it most and easing some of the challenges that we know are being experienced by people right across not just Victoria and Australia but the world as it relates to housing insecurity. People who are over-represented in these

cohorts are the vulnerable – victim-survivors of family violence, young people, people who want to age in place and First Nations folk.

We also know that it takes a joined-up approach to make sure that housing can be delivered in the configurations and the locations where we are going to be providing meaningful opportunities for people to have a place to call home that meets their needs. That might be accessibility. It might be energy efficiency. It might be having a home that actually complies with contemporary design standards and an opportunity for people to be proud of where they live. We are going to continue to do that work.

As it stands, the Big Housing Build has spent around \$2.5 billion. We have committed around \$4.3 billion, and we have commenced around 5177 units. We are determined to make sure that we continue that work, and we are working really hard every single day, including in partnership with the community housing sector, as I said, with the Commonwealth, Housing Australia and the Housing Australia Future Fund. This is really a challenge that requires long-term investment, support, dedication and commitment. We are singularly focused on making sure that our priorities stay exactly in that space.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:06): I thank the minister for her very thorough response and also the acknowledgement of those that are in the community most vulnerable, who this is to support the most. By way of supplementary, the 25 per cent rent income cap for public housing does not apply to community housing, so I ask: what measures is the government putting in place to ensure that the community housing providers making up that shortfall in supply will provide housing that is affordable and accessible?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:06): Thank you very much, Ms Payne, for that supplementary. As I referred to in my answer to the substantive question, community housing providers are a really, really important part of the work that we are doing. When we talk about ACCOs, when we talk about women’s housing, when we talk about housing provided by Haven Home Safe for people with really complex care needs, it is about making sure that we can have that not-for-profit, for-purpose arrangement.

Government provides funding to community housing providers as well, so I just want to be really, really clear that this is not a privatised arrangement, despite what some people might think. It is about making sure that we can provide housing in a range of different ways. Community housing does have a 25 to 30 per cent allocation of income, and there is a cap there. We also take an opportunity to provide community housing providers with income from the Commonwealth rent assistance program. That payment is remitted to the community housing provider as a revenue source to continue to provide that, and that is where again that balance comes in. We will continue to work on providing you with information, though, should you wish to have more information beyond the briefing on social housing that your party has requested.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Before we go to the next question, I wish to acknowledge a delegation from the National Diet of Japan, led by Fujii Hisayuki-sama, who are visiting the Victorian Parliament today. I welcome the delegation to the house.

Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:08): (614) My question is for the Minister for Housing. I refer to the project you oversee at Victoria Street, Flemington, which is due for completion in 2024, with your construction partner Icon. Given the enterprise agreement struck between Icon and the CFMEU is in force on this site, what assurance can you provide the Victorian community that no threatening, corrupt, violent or illegal behaviour has occurred on the site?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:08): Thank you, Mr Davis, for that question and for your interest in making sure that our

workplaces are free from criminal behaviour and unsafe, unlawful or otherwise inappropriate industrial relations practices. I have sought and received assurances that the arrangements entered into by contractors, developers and employee organisations, whoever they might be, have not been the subject of any allegations of criminal or inappropriate behaviour.

What I would say in addition to that is that if there are any allegations of criminal, unlawful, unsafe, inappropriate or coercive behaviour or actions on our worksites, across our builds, in our workplaces, whether it is a boardroom or a factory floor, people should report those allegations so that action can be taken. It is crucially important that people have a measure of process available to them, whether that is about notifying relevant integrity bodies, whether that is about getting in contact with the Fair Work Ombudsman, whether that is about escalating any matters of a criminal nature to police for a response, whether that is about, as the Premier has done, making sure that matters of concern can be raised for the attention of IBAC or others.

Mr Davis, I would hope, unlike what you did in 2020, when you failed to refer a matter of such concern to integrity bodies as a local member, that in fact anybody else who has such concerns will do what is necessary to make sure that those matters can be investigated. What I would also say –

David Davis: On a point of order, Deputy President, this is an opportunity for questions of government ministers. It is not an opportunity for the minister to attack the opposition.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I will draw the minister back to the substance of the question.

Harriet SHING: Thank you. Mr Davis, statements of fact can often be uncomfortable, so I can forgive you your reaction. I very, very proudly and determinedly stand by my commitment to safe workplaces. When I stood in this place and voted in support of industrial manslaughter laws, wage theft sanctions and the work around amendments to occupational health and safety legislation to ensure that people are able to go to work and return home safe with the protections of the law around them, I did so with the convictions that underpin the work of this government. I am determined – and I would hope that more people, perhaps on your benches, share the same view – to make sure that people can access safe, reasonable, fair terms and conditions and a fair safety net of terms and have the benefit, including of representation of unions, on their worksites to make and keep them safe.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:12): Deputy President, I will just make the point that I have made referrals on a number of occasions. Beyond that, I thank the minister for her response, and I note that the minister said –

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Can we hear the question in silence, please.

David DAVIS: I note that the minister said that she had sought and received assurances. I ask her: will you make those available to the house and the community?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:12): Mr Davis, I am making those available right now. I have sought and I have received assurances. I am not sure what it is that you are –

David Davis: On a point of order, Deputy President, it is very clear that if the minister has received documents or information or assurances, she should make those available to the house. Simply asserting that she has received them is not sufficient.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The minister has been speaking for 13 seconds. I will ask her to continue with her answer.

Harriet SHING: Again, Mr Davis –

Georgie Crozier: You have misled the house. You haven't at all.

Harriet SHING: Ms Crozier, if you would like to move that by way of substantive motion, then do feel free to go ahead. I am very happy to confirm to the house, as I have now on a number of occasions, that I have sought and received assurances about the contracts and engagements, including collective agreements that have been negotiated by and approved by parties to them and indeed taken to the Fair Work Commission, a federal body. Mr Davis, we can go right back to industrial relations 101 if you would like to understand how these various parts of the jurisdiction interrelate. I have sought and received assurances about the proper conduct of parties to those enterprise agreements in the discussion, negotiation and the reaching of terms as they relate to them.

David Davis interjected.

Harriet SHING: Mr Davis, I am giving you what you have asked for, right here and right now. Have a look at *Hansard* when it is published.

Ministers statements: corrections system

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:14): Stable employment after leaving prison is one of the most important factors in helping people to turn their lives around and stay out of prison for good. That is why the Allan Labor government is delivering vocational education and employment programs right across our corrections system. I had the pleasure of visiting Fulham prison in Gippsland last week to celebrate one such program called Cows Create Careers. This innovative program connects minimum security prisoners nearing the end of their sentence with local dairy industry professionals to learn the skills they need to work in Victoria's dairy industry. During the program people in custody care for two young dairy calves under the supervision of local vets and farmers. In this program the calves live in specially designed facilities on the prison grounds, and I understand that the facilities were built by those men in custody and assembled also. In this program they learn real-world skills that will assist with employment in the community.

This is not just good news for people in custody but also for our nation-leading dairy industry. A fun fact of the day: over 60 per cent of our nation's dairy comes from Victoria. This means that people will be job ready upon leaving prison and also will be willing to help build Victoria's dairy workforce. This program is proudly a Gippsland innovation. Starting off as a local school program –

Members interjecting.

Enver ERDOGAN: I will take the interjection. It has been around for over 20 years, but this is the first time it will be rolled out in a prison setting. And now with the generous support of GippsDairy and the Gardiner Foundation, it will be at Fulham. I want to thank our partners as well. This program is the first of its kind, and it is fitting that Fulham prison in Gippsland has grabbed the bull by the horns. It was an honour to see the program in action last week and to congratulate the participants. Programs like Cows Create Careers are proof of our commitment to giving people in custody –

Katherine Copsey: On a point of order, Deputy President, I am sorry to interrupt the minister, but I am sitting next to him and I cannot hear him, so I was wondering if you could ask the house to return to order.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The minister to continue without assistance, please.

Enver ERDOGAN: It was an honour to see the program in action last week and to congratulate the participants. Programs like Cows Create Careers are proof of our commitment to giving people in custody the tools they need to turn their lives around.

Animal shelters

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:16): (615) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Agriculture. Last week the government released Victoria's animal fate data for the second reporting period of 1 July to 31 December 2023. It tells us that in six months

Victorian pounds and shelters euthanised 5035 cats and 1272 dogs. In total 1249 of these animals were killed for so-called behavioural reasons. Twenty-five dogs died in the care of GAP, the only greyhound rehoming group that is funded by this government. Twenty-four of these dogs were euthanised mostly for their behaviour, but one dog was listed as having died without euthanasia. Can the minister advise how this dog died?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:17): I thank the member for her question and will refer it, through the Attorney-General as the representative minister, to the Minister for Agriculture in the other place.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:17): The mandatory reporting of animal fate data was one of 17 recommendations from the Taskforce on Rehoming Pets, chaired by former Animal Justice Party MP Andy Meddick. This work set out to understand the operation of pounds and shelters and help support them in their efforts to successfully rehome dogs and cats across Victoria. Now that we have greater transparency through animal fate data reporting, we must continue forward to the next steps, which include ending outdated methods of behavioural testing. In their response the government supported all of these recommendations, yet three years on from this none have been implemented. Meanwhile rehomeable animals continue to be killed at unacceptable levels across the state. Can the minister advise when these recommendations will actually be implemented?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:18): I again thank the member for her question. In accordance with the standing orders I will refer it accordingly.

TAFE teachers

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (12:18): (616) My question is to the Minister for Skills and TAFE. Minister, 71 per cent of TAFE teachers state that they considered quitting their job under your watch last year. Seventy-nine per cent of TAFE teachers say that there is a teacher shortage and that excessive workloads, working unpaid overtime and the chronic underfunding of TAFEs in Victoria is contributing to them considering quitting. Is the failure of the Allan Labor government to settle its protracted pay dispute the reason that nearly three-quarters of TAFE teachers considered quitting – is that the reason why?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:19): I thank the member for his question. I think the majority of people in this house would understand that those opposite certainly are not warriors on behalf of workers, let alone TAFE teachers, because it was those opposite that sacked over 2000 TAFE teachers when they were last in government.

Joe McCracken: On a point of order, Deputy President, on relevance. This has nothing to do with the question I asked at all.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I will bring the minister back to the subject of the question. I remind you that we have visitors in the gallery. Can we please have question time with a bit of decorum. But I do ask the minister not to invite the opposition to interject and to stick to the subject.

Gayle TIERNEY: If there were not 2000 teachers sacked, we would not have the degree of teacher shortages in the TAFE system, Mr McCracken. Indeed what we have done – given that there is a prerequisite to have the certificate IV in teaching and assessment, we actually put it on the free TAFE list so that we could create a pipeline of skilled TAFE teachers in our system. In fact there has been a 57 per cent increase in enrolments in relation to that specific course.

Of course there is an industrial situation at the moment because the parties are in negotiation for a new settlement. In fact there are scheduled negotiations this week. These are things that happen that are routine, and of course there are going to be claims on either side. What I have been calling for from day one is that the issues are put on the table, that there are solutions found and that we find a resolution

as soon as possible so that we can continue to get on and do the fantastic job that we are doing in rebuilding TAFE, which was smashed by those opposite because those opposite hate TAFE and have got no regard for TAFE teachers.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (12:21): If the government cares so much about workers, why is the Allan Labor government forcing Victorian TAFE teachers to work unpaid overtime?

Gayle Tierney (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:22): Again, there are a number of issues that have been put on the table by both sides. We are working through those issues. Of course we want people to work and be paid, and of course I do take this opportunity to thank each and every TAFE teacher who has helped this government rebuild the TAFE system into a system that we can be proud of, a TAFE system that was smashed by those opposite.

Joe McCracken: On a point of order, Deputy President, on relevance, the government had two years to settle this pay dispute. I ask them to actually answer the question instead of filibustering.

The Deputy President: The minister to continue.

Gayle Tierney: Thank you. I do take this opportunity to again thank TAFE teachers for all of the hard work that they do, day in and day out, in making sure that they are delivering fantastic courses that are industry aligned and that are a lot more relevant than they were under the previous government. It is now a system that we can all feel very proud of. Our graduates are very, very happy with the fact that they have been able to access free TAFE, which has led into jobs. This is a groundbreaker. We have led the nation.

Ministers statements: homelessness

Harriet Shing (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:23): Last week was national Homelessness Week, and it was not a celebration. What it was was an opportunity to bring so many of us together, including people from all over this chamber and the other place, to have some conversations that are, and indeed should be, a source of discomfort but also determination. Homelessness itself is often exceptionally complex. But although home is a starting point, we also know that it comes against the backdrop of often lifelong and indeed intergenerational trauma and disadvantage as well as vulnerability and humiliation. Everybody deserves a home that is safe and secure and provides a source of dignity and connection and a way for people to live authentically.

The 2024–25 budget includes around \$197 million to support people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. We also know that it is important to invest in social inclusion, which is why there is \$40.8 million in the Journey to Social Inclusion program, based on the Housing First principles, and a \$103.9 million, four-year grant program for contemporary and evidence-based solutions to drive down homelessness. There has also been an \$8.2 million investment in May 2024 to continue to boost homelessness services, and that builds on around \$300 million annually to support our homelessness service sector. Homelessness needs to be and should be rare, brief and non-recurring. When we talk about it being rare, this means we also need to be able to provide housing right across the housing continuum, from crisis and transitional housing right through to social housing, private rental assistance and the work we are doing in that space, affordable housing and then ultimately, for people for whom this is an aspiration, home ownership. We are determined to continue this work. I thank everybody who was part of the discussions last week and will be part of the discussions to continue.

Pharmacotherapy services

David Limbrick (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:25): (617) My question is for the Minister for Mental Health. Pharmacotherapy is an important tool to help people manage opiate addiction. It is also a useful tool to undermine organised crime by diverting people away from the illicit market, as I noted recently in an opinion piece in the *Herald Sun*. Last week, with a great sense of urgency, I

advocated for the government to do whatever was necessary to prevent the imminent closure of a health clinic in Frankston which provides opioid replacement therapy for many people in the south-east. It seems that the closure of this clinic is now just a few weeks away and Dr Taylor will finally be allowed to retire. I wish him well in his retirement. The government has now had ample time to plan for an alternative for the clients, so my question for the minister is: will the Frankston Hospital be able to service all of the clients of Dr Taylor, and if not, what is the plan to ensure they have continuity of care?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:26): I thank Mr Limbrick for his question. Yes, I wholeheartedly agree with you, Mr Limbrick, that pharmacotherapy is a key part of our toolkit when it comes to addressing drug harm across the community. I have been keeping abreast of what has been happening down in Frankston because of course when we initially heard that the GP clinic was going to be closing down, it was a signal to both the department and me as minister that we would need to have contingencies in place because of the large number of people that rely on pharmacotherapy treatment down there in the Frankston area.

My understanding and the latest advice that I have got on this is that the service is continuing to operate. There have been a number of occasions where they have stated publicly that they are going to be closing permanently, so it has been a little fluid in terms of that information. Whilst GP-led pharmacotherapy treatment is primarily a matter for the Commonwealth, we have stepped in because we understand the importance of making sure that there is that continuity of care for these patients. We have invested. The Allan Labor government has provided additional funding and we have been working with Peninsula Health and the local primary health network to establish a public pharmacotherapy clinic in Frankston. That new service commenced in March, and it is already supporting some of the current patients from the Frankston private clinic who have consented to move over to the public pharmacotherapy service. We have also ensured that there is additional capacity in that new public unit if and when the Frankston Healthcare Medical Centre does indeed close and the doctor retires.

So I am happy to advise that as of 12 August the new pharmacotherapy clinic is up and running. It has got a permanent new home across the road from Peninsula Health's Frankston campus. I am really pleased that people have worked together down in that Frankston area to get a very good outcome for people who really rely on this ongoing service.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:29): I thank the minister for her detailed response. On 7 June last year Minister Williams noted \$10 million of funding to plug gaps and expand pharmacotherapy services. With significant unmet need being estimated by people within the sector and several doctors, like Dr Taylor, due to retire, this attention was seen as the bare minimum to ensure the system did not collapse. The system failing is a concern, as for people who are stable on treatment, suddenly needing to find alternatives can be disastrous to their health and possibly to community safety. Earlier this year the government announced \$8.4 million of funding to boost pharmacotherapy in up to 30 locations through a grants program targeting areas of high demand or looming service gaps. Minister, is the \$8.4 million in funding announced this year new funding or is it simply the remainder of the \$10 million that was announced last year?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:30): I thank Mr Limbrick for that supplementary question. The additional funding was as a result of the announcements that the Premier and I made a few months back as part of our statewide AOD action plan. That was in recognition of the fact that we know that we need to strengthen the pharmacotherapy system here in Victoria. There will be two pieces of work that will occur. The first is, as you have mentioned, the grants that will be out for community health services to provide additional pharmacotherapy services in Victoria. Secondly, there will be a department-led review with the sector on other areas of the pharmacotherapy system that we need to address. I would also just point out that we have got the AOD strategy that will be out for public

consultation, including with the sector. I am sure many of our sector partners will have strong views about the pharmacotherapy system and its importance in the AOD system here in Victoria.

Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:31): (618) My question is for the Minister for Corrections. Minister, according to the Corrections Victoria Corrections, prison and parole website, there are five VET centres of excellence in civil construction and one VET sector of excellence in welding across the state's prisons. What is the role of the CFMEU in the provision of this training?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:31): I thank Mr Davis for his question and his interest in our centres of excellence. I have been very proud of our government, and you would have seen that from my ministers statement about the investments we have made in vocational and employment programs across our corrections system. Our centres of excellence are designed to give people in our custody the best chance to turn their lives around, and using their time productively with us is the best way. That means developing skills to better protect them and the broader community once they are released.

Our centres of excellence have a range of partners. For example, at Loddon Middleton we have got a partnership with the Kangan Institute to provide those services. In terms of partnerships, my understanding is that the partnerships are predominantly with the TAFE sector but also with employers that take on people upon their release. It has been a program that has been very successful. Over 60 people have received employment over the last 18 months or so through that program. In relation to the work that they do or membership of other associations, it is not a matter that has necessarily been brought to my attention, because our partnership is with the TAFE, Kangan Institute, which usually leads that work, and Corrections Victoria, which works with employers to get employment for the men in custody upon release.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:33): I listened very closely to what the minister said. He did not seem to answer the basic question of: what is the role of the CFMEU in the provision of this training? It seems he does not know, and if he does not know, he can come back –

Enver Erdogan: Kangan Institute and the employers have the role.

David DAVIS: I understand. You are saying there is no role? Or you are saying you do not know? In any event, are any vocational education and training programs available to Victorian prisoners delivered alongside or in partnership with the CFMEU?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:33): I thank Mr Davis for his supplementary question. I think I was very clear in my substantive: we have a partnership with Kangan Institute and with employers. When people are in employment upon release, there are a number of associations that people can join. Of course people working in the construction sector can be members of the CFMEU or not be members. That is a choice for the individual to make. But our partnerships are primarily through the TAFE system and with employers.

Ministers statements: mental health services

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:34): I rise to update the house on my recent visit to sunny Mildura and the work we are doing to improve access to mental health and alcohol and other drug services in the area. It was a pleasure to meet the team at the mental health and wellbeing local, including peer wellbeing navigator Michelle, an absolute force of nature who has channelled her lived experience to support members of the community to access the mental health care that best suits their needs. The local is already having a really positive impact in the community thanks to the collaboration of everyone involved. I also spent some time at Mallee District Aboriginal Services with Tiffany to hear about the important work the social and emotional wellbeing team is delivering there. Alongside an

impressive group of community members and some local government leaders, I announced that five more social inclusion action groups will be established, including one in Mildura. The groups will be made up of a diverse range of community members and local leaders working together to combat loneliness and isolation by boosting social inclusion and connection.

I also announced the address of the \$36 million drug and alcohol rehabilitation and withdrawal facility. This facility, which will be in Merbein, will be a game changer. It will ensure that locals do not have to travel outside of their community. They can stay in their community and get the support that they have through family and their networks while they get treatment and care that they need.

It was really great to speak with Aunty Jenene Murray and Aunty Jemmes Handy about the project, and I would like to acknowledge the work and advocacy of the Mallee District Aboriginal Services and the broader First Nations community for this rehab facility, which will benefit the whole Mildura and broader Mallee community. Mildura is definitely a special place, and I was blown away by how everyone works together to drive the best outcomes for the whole community. The Allan Labor government is proud to continue to invest in this community.

Housing

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:36): (619) My question today is to the Minister for Housing, and it relates to the housing project planned for the former Yarra Valley Water tank site at 421 Upper Heidelberg Road, Ivanhoe. It is a significant piece of state-owned land in a prime location. In the Labor government's consideration of the development of this site, did you as minister advocate for it to be a social housing development?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:36): Thank you, Mr Puglielli, for that question and for the work that you have correctly identified as being part of a whole-of-government initiative to address housing shortfall.

The site that you have referred to is actually sitting with Development Victoria, and one of the things that I want to perhaps take you to and take the chamber to is the interaction between the work that Development Victoria and the Minister for Precincts do alongside what I outlined to this chamber when the housing statement first became something that I was partially working to deliver in the housing portfolio. We have across the board a number of ministers who are responsible for the housing statement. They include the precincts minister, Minister Brooks, who works with DV, and the work that I am doing across social, affordable, crisis accommodation and transitional housing and also an element of affordable housing. Minister Tierney in regional development is doing the worker accommodation work alongside the regional housing build. So when we talk about sites like this, there is a discussion about a proportion of those sites that can be allocated to, for example, affordable housing. Again, I do not want to speculate because of the land that is still yet to be determined for a number of sites that are part of the work of DV. That includes the work that I am doing to advocate for social housing as part of what we deliver across sites that are in the remit of Development Victoria.

I regularly, routinely – and I would hazard a guess that some people might say ‘incessantly’ – advocate to colleagues and to the Commonwealth around making sure that we can deliver social housing across as much of the stock that is being developed. This is where the development facilitation program comes in. It is where the work associated with the short-stay levy comes in. It is about making sure that when and as we develop sites, we are doing so with a view to providing housing to people who are vulnerable, people who are key workers, people who are looking for private market rentals and people who want to move into home ownership. So when I answer your question, and I hope that I have given you a sense of my engagement to date, I just want to leave it abundantly clear to you that I am regularly driven to conversations about how we can include social housing across as much of the development that we are doing around the state as possible to make sure also that people in social housing have access to the sorts of homes that we should all have access to as we lean into those dual challenges and blockages of affordability and availability.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:39): Thank you, Minister, for your response. To my understanding, as of yet there has not been any clarity as to whether there will be a specific amount of social housing designated for the site in question, so in your remit as housing minister could you tell the chamber why as of yet there is no specific amount of social housing designated for this key piece of state-owned land?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:40): Mr Puglielli, I went to this briefly in my answer to the substantive question. It is yet to be determined in terms of where and how those configurations of apportionment will end up. What I can assure you, though, when we are talking about those – it has been termed in sporting nomenclature as ‘MCGs worth’; I am not a sporting person but it seems to make sense to other people as a unit of measurement – 13 MCGs worth of land being brought onto the scene as being able to deliver housing, I am advocating for as much of that to be social housing as possible. Because we do need to make sure when we are delivering on this social housing – and we are talking well beyond the 12,000 in the Big Housing Build; we are talking up to around 18,000 social housing homes across a range of different programs – that the homes are situated in communities and that they are well appointed and well connected. I will not stop doing that work; that is my job, and I take it really seriously.

Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:41): (620) My question is again for the Minister for Housing. Minister, in response to my first question you indicated you had sought and received assurances about safety on the sites with respect to the CFMEU, and I ask a simple question –

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: With respect, you talked about a whole range of points. Who provided those assurances to you, Minister?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:41): Mr Davis, your question – and you might want to go back to what it was that you asked me specifically – did not actually specify the question of safety as a standalone component of your question.

Members interjecting.

Harriet SHING: If you want to talk about safety, Mr Davis, then let us talk about safety, because we know all too well that the four most dangerous workplace sectors in Victoria, where we see fatalities, serious injuries and near misses, are agriculture, mining, construction and roads.

David Davis interjected.

Harriet SHING: No, no, no. Your question refers to safety. So when we are talking about safety on worksites, I want to be really, really clear about the importance of making sure that safe systems of work –

David Davis: On a point of order, Deputy President, my question was a very simple one, about the assurances that she said she had received. Who provided those assurances? Who?

Michael Galea: On the point of order, Deputy President, I believe the minister is plainly being relevant to the question.

Georgie Crozier: Further to the point of order, Deputy President, Mr Davis’s question was very specific in reference to his first question, and I would ask you to bring the minister back to that direct response required for Mr Davis.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: As you know, I cannot direct the minister how to answer, but I would ask the minister to be responsive.

Harriet SHING: So, Mr Davis, you asked a question about safety.

David Davis: And the first question.

Harriet SHING: I have answered the first question.

Members interjecting.

Harriet SHING: Mr Davis, if you are going to conflate the right of workers to have a safe workplace –

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! Can we have some silence, thank you.

Harriet SHING: If you are going to conflate the right of workers, at law, to have a safe workplace, to go to work and to come home without injury – if you are going to conflate those issues, then what that says about you is that you are not prepared to countenance any system of accountability around people’s right to go to work and not die. Mr Davis, we are talking about one of the four most dangerous sectors in Victoria, which is where we see a significant concentration of fatalities, of serious injuries and of near misses.

David Davis: On a point of order, Deputy President, the minister is verballing me. I used the words in the first question ‘threatening, corrupt, violent and illegal behaviour’. That is about safety. Threatening behaviour and violent behaviour onsite is about safety. The minister might not want to recognise that threats by CFMEU members onsite are about safety. Well, I do, and I take offence at the minister suggesting that we do not.

Harriet SHING: On the point of order, Deputy President, I would ask that you actually go back to *Hansard* and Mr Davis’s question and his specific reference to safety, and I would ask that you give consideration to that in relation to Mr Davis’s concerns as he has just raised them.

Georgie Crozier: Further on the point of order, Deputy President, the minister is not answering the question. Mr Davis referenced his first question, which went to the issue around corrupt, violent and illegal behaviour, which is not safe.

Members interjecting.

Georgie Crozier: No, in the answer the minister gave she mentioned safety. That is all Mr Davis was referring to in his follow-up question around the assurances, which she is refusing to answer. I would ask you to bring her back to the specifics of Mr Davis’s question.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: As you know, I cannot instruct the minister how to answer. I do ask the minister to be relevant to Mr Davis’s question. The minister has 39 seconds to go.

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Deputy President. Mr Davis, when a provisional improvement notice is issued around a legitimate workplace safety concern, that is a matter for safety.

Members interjecting.

Harriet SHING: Mr Davis, when a matter goes to WorkSafe for investigation –

Lizzie Blandthorn: On a point of order, Deputy President, the interjections are such that it is impossible for anybody to make a contribution and actually be heard, so I would ask that you bring the house to order.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I was just thinking the same myself. We only have 22 seconds to go of this question, so if the minister could continue without assistance.

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Deputy President. Mr Davis, if you do not believe that there should be any means for workers to raise issues of safety in one of the four most dangerous work sectors in the state, then that is a reflection on your view –

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, Deputy President, the minister is verballing Mr Davis, and she knows what she is doing. I would ask you to bring her back to answering the question. If she has not got the assurances, then she should just tell the house.

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The government is right; it is not a point of order. We have 9 seconds to go. I would ask the minister not to be so inviting of the opposition to call any more points of order. Could the minister just give her answer in the remaining 9 seconds.

Harriet SHING: Mr Davis, if you do not believe in safe systems of work, then have the guts to stand up and say so.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:48): I notice that in the minister's response to my very simple question – 'Who provided the assurances to you?' – she refused to say who that person was. In response to the minister's non-answer I ask –

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: It is the member's supplementary. Can we please have some quiet while he asks it.

David DAVIS: In your first question you indicated you had sought and received assurances. You will not tell us from whom, and I ask therefore: were they in writing or just flimsy verbal assurances?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:49): Speaking of flimsy, Mr Davis, speaking of flimsy. Mr Davis, I make it a matter of personal interest, which I see as a responsibility in this portfolio, that wherever I go to a project that is being delivered under the Big Housing Build and under the Social Housing Growth Fund, being delivered by community housing providers, being delivered in partnership with the Commonwealth, being delivered in partnership with consortia, being delivered in partnership with local councils and the work on the ground to make sure that people have the housing that they need, that they deserve and that in fact should be provided to them – which we are funding in record volumes – that I ask them about how these projects have gone and about how their workforce has been encouraged and supported in doing the work that they do. Mr Davis, that is the business of the portfolio. Now, it is something you probably would not understand because it has been quite some time since you botched health, yet I will continue to do that work – *(Time expired)*

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:50): I move:

That the minister's non-answer be taken into account on the next day of meeting.

Members interjecting.

Michael Galea: On a point of order, Deputy President, Mr Davis did not actually ask for the minister's answer to be taken into account. He added his own elaborations to that.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I thought that Mr Davis had asked for the minister's answer to be taken into account on the next day of sitting. Would you like to repeat what you want, Mr Davis, please?

David DAVIS: I move:

That the minister's answers be taken into account on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: childhood services

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:51): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is continuing to work with parents, carers, grandparents and families to improve services for children aged zero to 12. Most recently I was delighted to host a children's round table at Alphington Community Centre with the member for Northcote from the other place to meet with parents, carers and some of their children as well as representatives from organisations such as local kinders and maternal and child health services to discuss programs and services accessed by children and their families. Eighteen formal round tables have been scheduled to be held across Victoria throughout the remainder of the year, and this was the fourth children's round table that I have had the privilege to host since June. Round tables have also been held in Point Cook, in Oakleigh and in Flemington. In Flemington we met with grandparents and kinship carers to hear their perspectives and insights on raising children. The discussions have focused on each stage of a child's development and the services that support families when caring for children at those ages.

I am very appreciative of the time that members of our community have taken to participate in the round tables and to share their personal stories and experiences on the journey of raising young children. I personally have gained many valuable insights from hearing directly from parents and carers about their varied experiences. This feedback from the round tables will directly help to inform policies, programs and initiatives across the children's portfolio to improve outcomes for our youngest Victorians and their families. These 18 round tables are being held with Victorians from across the state, stretching from metropolitan Melbourne to rural and regional Victoria. They will also include sessions focused on vulnerable members of the community, including First Nations Victorians and those caring for children with a disability.

This process is what the children's portfolio is all about – hearing from parents and carers and their children about their experiences across early childhood services, because we know that families do not operate in silos, and neither should government. This is the reason the Premier and I are committed to the children's portfolio, bringing together the work across government that supports our children and families to improve outcomes for our youngest Victorians.

Written responses

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (12:53): For answers from question time, I order that written answers be given for Ms Purcell's questions to the Minister for Agriculture, with two days for both answers, and also that a written answer be provided for Mr McCracken's substantive question. That is required within one day.

Gaelle Broad: On a point of order, Deputy President, I have questions that remain unanswered. There are nine. I can list them now or provide them.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Okay, yes, if you want to do them.

Gaelle Broad: Good. Questions 1162, 915, 868, 827, 745, 672, 528, 386 and 244.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: We will ask the ministers to follow those up.

Constituency questions

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:54): (1019) My constituency question is directed towards the Minister for Public and Active Transport in the other place, and it concerns public

transport access to universities in the Northern Metropolitan Region. Access to universities is very difficult and leading to poor outcomes, particularly for those in the outer northern suburbs. In fact 20 per cent of year 12 graduates within the City of Hume actually go to university, and barriers to transport are a big part of that. There are insufficient local public transport links. I would like to thank hardworking Hume councillor Sam Misho for his advocacy on this. I know the City of Hume wrote to the previous minister, now the Deputy Premier, before, seeking new bus routes from Craigieburn, Coolaroo and Upfield stations to La Trobe University and Victoria Uni. My question to the minister is: what work is being done to improve public transport links between local railway stations and universities?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Adem SOMYUREK (Northern Metropolitan) (12:55): (1020) My constituency question is directed to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and is regarding the shutting down for an extended period of time of a vital intersection in Greenvale. In 2021 the intersection at Fleetwood Drive and Somerton Road, Greenvale, was shut down to enable the construction of a new intersection. Yet three years down the track the upgrade has still not been completed. I have received numerous complaints from local residents who are increasingly frustrated at the closure of this road. They understand the importance of this upgrade; nevertheless three years is a very long time to be inconvenienced by the closure. I ask the minister to communicate to the local community how much longer the residents must endure this massive inconvenience.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:56): (1021) My question is for the Minister for Children. How is the Labor government supporting new parents and their babies in the Southern Metropolitan Region? During World Breastfeeding Week at the beginning of August, I visited the North Brighton maternal and child health centre, a fabulous centre in North Brighton, with the Minister for Children. We spoke to new mother Katie, who told us about the terrific support that she had received at the centre to establish breastfeeding with her newborn son Paris. The lactation service at the centre is in high demand. We spoke to Val, the maternal and child health nurse there, who told us just how critical the services at that centre are to support new parents and particularly new mothers. This year's state budget had an allocation of a further \$28 million to meet the growing demand for maternal and child health services here in Victoria. The North Brighton Children's Centre also recently received a grant of \$600,000 to upgrade its kindergarten rooms. This Labor government is supporting families across the Southern Metropolitan Region.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:57): (1022) My constituency question is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure and Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Last week I met with members of the Highett Progress Association Douglas, Elizabeth, Janina, Colin and Zandra. Douglas had written to me. In his email he said:

Highett residents are alarmed and in some cases already suffering mental anguish from the overwhelming change to their lives and wellbeing threatened by the Suburban Rail Loop Authority ... plans for Cheltenham Precinct.

When I spoke with these residents they did point out just how anxious they were about the government's plans for 18-storey residential towers, with high density in the area, which will increase traffic congestion, reduce open space and place huge pressure on local facilities and essential services, including schools and the like – recreation, roads, public transport and health care. The issue is these residents would like to meet the minister. So I ask: will the minister meet with these concerned residents in Highett to listen to them and address these important matters that will significantly change their community?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:58): (1023) My question is to the Minister for Housing. Minister, I wrote to you in January 2024 about Roza, a constituent of mine in Southern Metropolitan. I followed this up with a constituency question in March 2024, which I note remains unanswered, but there is new information. Roza applied for and was approved for a public housing transfer in 2019. Her son Akmel lives with multiple disabilities, and their current home is inaccessible. She has to carry him up and down multiple flights of stairs each day. Roza is now pregnant, and she has been hospitalised. Doctors have documented concerns that daily lifting of an older, heavier child up and down stairs is putting Roza's health at risk. That medical assessment was sent to your office in June 2024. Minister, when will Roza and her family be approved for housing which is suitable for their needs and does not present ongoing risks for their health?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:59): (1024) Every election it seems that the cohort of MPs gets younger and younger, and this place in particular must be home to some of our youngest ever MPs – one is sitting right behind me in fact – and they are truly an inspiration for young people across the state who are developing their own political positions, political identity and aspirations for the future. I really love seeing young people take an active interest in politics and I encourage all young people to keep updated and get involved in politics in any way that they can. At the grassroots local level or internationally, it does not matter: just make your voice heard. Young people from my electorate often contact my electorate office, and recently a year 11 student at Brunswick Secondary named Zac came in to ask some questions about how the government works and how government policy is formulated. I ask, on behalf of Zac, the Minister for Youth in the other place: what is the Allan Labor government doing to support young people across the Northern Metropolitan Region?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:00): (1025) With the Education State faltering under Labor, with approximately 300,000 students, or one in three Victorian students, not meeting basic standards in maths and English, my question is to the Minister for Education, and I ask: what immediate action is being taken to address the issue of student absenteeism, particularly in the municipalities of Casey, Cardinia and Frankston in my electorate. Frankston is number eight on the top 10 local government areas list with the most year 7 absences in 2023, numbering over 35,000 days of absenteeism across over 1300 students. This is up more than 29,000 days from 2019. In Cardinia there has been a 55 per cent increase in year 6 students being absent from school, and in Casey the most significant increase has been the year 11 students, with an increase of 87.6 per cent. I spoke about absenteeism recently in an adjournment, but students need to be at school. What action is this government taking to address this?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:01): (1026) My constituency question is for Minister Blandthorn in her capacity as Minister for Children. Last week the minister announced the new round of the bush kinder program, which provides one-off grants to help kindergartens establish or enhance offsite programs held in local outdoor natural spaces or enhance onsite programs by improving outdoor biodiversity. This program provides up to 150 kindergartens with grants of up to \$6000 to give children more opportunities to learn and to get outdoors. Applications are currently open and they close on 4 September, with successful recipients to be announced later in the year. Eunoia Education Childcare Centre and Kindergarten in Berwick was a successful 2023 applicant from my electorate. I ask: Minister, how does the bush kinder program support kindergartens in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region to establish nature programs that will give kinder-aged children more opportunities to get outdoors?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (13:03): (1027) My question for the Minister for Health concerns evidence given by local council CEOs at last week's Economy and Infrastructure Committee hearing in Camperdown. Members heard from several councils that a ministerial letter dated 31 July now demands they pay a new annual fee to co-fund the Department of Health's central immunisation register and an additional fee for each individual immunisation registered. Neither consultation nor advance notice was provided, and the demand comes far too late for inclusion in budgets prepared for this financial year. As one example, the estimated cost to Warrnambool City Council is \$35,000, money which must now be found by cuts to other resident services. I am not sure what is worse: the disorganisation, the disrespect or the financial incompetence which has led to this new demand. Minister, when will you reverse the imposition of this job tax – a tax on health and a raid on council budgets?

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (13:04): (1028) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. In December last year the streetlighting and intelligent transport system on the EJ Whitten Bridge on the M80 before the Sunshine Avenue exit was compromised due to vandalism and cable theft. VicRoads has since installed temporary mobile speed signs but no lighting to ensure road safety for traffic on this section of the freeway. It has been seven months, and there is still no lighting for night traffic along a 4-kilometre stretch leading up to and on the EJ Whitten Bridge. Could the minister please provide an update to my constituents on the progress of restoring lighting on the EJ Whitten Bridge and the measures being taken to prevent further theft and vandalism to the intelligent transport system that affects the safety of all road users? It is time the Labor government stopped neglecting the west and started prioritising the safety of all road users on major freeways.

Sitting suspended 1:05 pm until 2:03 pm.

Bills**Government Construction Projects Integrity Bill 2024***Second reading*

Debate resumed.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (14:03): I move:

That this matter be adjourned until the next day of meeting.

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

Committees**Legal and Social Issues Committee***Reference*

Georgie Crozier (Southern Metropolitan) (14:03): I move:

That this house requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider, and report, no later than 31 August 2025, on the core issues impacting the management and functions of Ambulance Victoria, including but not limited to:

- (1) issues involving call taking, dispatch, ambulance ramping, working conditions and workloads of paramedics;
- (2) procurement practices, including contract management and oversight, and their adequacy in ensuring transparency, fairness, and value for public funds and identification of any systemic patterns of mismanagement or lack of oversight;
- (3) allegations of fraud and embezzlement and the adequacy of financial controls and oversight to prevent misconduct;

- (4) governance and accountability;
- (5) the workplace culture within Ambulance Victoria, with a focus on occupational health and safety impacts, including to the morale and wellbeing of paramedics and employees; and
- (6) any other related matters the committee considers relevant.

I think every Victorian understands the issues that are going on, because not only is there a great deal of media interest in the number of ambulances ramping outside hospitals across our state but patients and their families are being affected. People are very aware of the situation. In the motion, I am looking into – and I will come back to the ramping issue – issues involving call taking, dispatch, ambulance ramping, working conditions and workloads of paramedics; the procurement practices, including contract management and oversight; allegations of fraud and embezzlement and the adequacy of financial controls and oversight to prevent misconduct within AV; governance and accountability; the workplace culture within Ambulance Victoria; and other related matters.

Concerningly, last night 1 per cent of ambulances were available for the Victorian public – 1 per cent. That means that 99 per cent of ambulances were in use, ramped, but could not be utilised for sick and needy Victorians. I find that extraordinary. No code red, no warnings to the public – 1 per cent of ambulances were available. It is not just last night when this happened; it is a continual pattern. There is no recognition by the government around the seriousness of this issue, and there are no warnings to the public around the seriousness of this issue. On Friday night – and Ms Lovell is in the house; I know she has been very concerned about what is happening in her area – there was a 7-hour wait for care at the Goulburn Valley base hospital in Shepparton. On Monday night there were 130 ambulances ramped at one stage, but at the peak there were up to 167. These are extraordinary numbers, so it is no wonder that there is so much frustration around the work of the paramedics, who are doing what they are doing. They are doing a phenomenal job in attending to what they need to do to care for sick Victorians and those Victorians who need emergency care.

As I said, the 1 per cent issue of ramping last night is not a one-off. It is happening day in, day out. As paramedics say to me, this is the disaster response that is business as usual. This happens every day. When I asked them ‘What about AV’s own plan around dealing with those issues around shortages, the extreme workload and demand ERP sub-plan?’ the answer came back ‘Well, the government changed the goalposts and they’ve manipulated that.’ But this plan does not stray away from the fact. It states that a code orange is actual or anticipated delays between 2 to 3 hours past target response times and less than 5 per cent availability. Code red delays are greater than 3 hours past the target response timeframes and ‘Consider after orange escalation for 4 hours.’ But it is talking about less than 5 per cent of fleet availability as well.

So those issues around what is required for the extreme workload and demand, as I said, are actually business as usual now for Ambulance Victoria. And it is increasingly frustrating for paramedics, who want to get out onto the road and do what they need to do, to be stuck ramped when the government has not fixed the issues within our emergency departments – fixed those issues that are clogging the system – where you cannot get the patients through the system. This is not as a result of COVID; these issues were building prior to COVID. The government have not catered for an increasing population in the way Victoria has increased fairly significantly over the last decade, and they have not really catered for the demands of the public with the complexity of their health. At the time, through COVID, I was saying, ‘If you delay these services and surgeries and screenings, you’re going to get a sicker population.’ Well, that is exactly what is happening, and now we have got ambulances that are being taken out of their areas and taken into other areas because there is just no coverage in regional areas.

It was on Monday night, again, that there was just no MICA ambulance somewhere in regional Victoria. It was a significant area – I just cannot quite recall – where there was no MICA ambulance available because everyone was working on another sick patient in the area and there was nothing

around to assist in the workload. As the news was breaking, the 6 pm news on Monday referred to this issue:

Chaos is unfolding outside Victorian hospitals, with more than 130 ambulances waiting outside with nowhere to go.

Only 12 per cent of ambulances available in the state are available to respond to a medical emergency ...

said Channel 9.

As I mentioned, at the peak there were 167 ambulances waiting outside emergency departments. As I said, it was particularly bad in regional areas. In Bendigo last night, the Premier's electorate, there were no paramedics to treat patients between Melbourne and Mildura because paramedics were treating a patient waiting on a chair in a hallway. That is the frustration about what paramedics are saying to me and they are saying to others, what the reality of the situation is. When we are talking about ramping, it is real and it is significant. In the words of one paramedic to me, 'There is massive ramping across the state. It is not a one-off. It happens all the time.'

Is it any wonder that we have got paramedics exhausted and wanting to understand what on earth is going on around ambulance ramping. Look at the dispatch system – we hear over and over again that ambulances are called out to minor cases. You can understand that happening occasionally or you can understand, for various reasons, why that might happen. When I speak to paramedics who have been overseeing the Triple Zero Victoria call takers, they have got clinical expertise and they are guiding them, but their workplace has been shut down and they have to move to a centralised system in Melbourne because a provisional improvement notice could not be fixed in time. WorkSafe went in and looked at it and that PIN could not be fixed in time, so what do they do? They shut that office down and moved those paramedics to Melbourne. This is what is happening. I think we need to understand those workloads and the working conditions of paramedics to understand the full extent of how the system is operating.

I want to move to the next point in my motion, and it is around procurement practices, including contract management and oversight. Back in 2022, just prior to the last state election, in the seat of South Barwon the government promised \$30.4 million for the Armstrong Creek ambulance station. Other stations were costing around a tenth of that – \$3 million to \$4 million. Melton West had a budget of \$2.875 million. The now disgraced then Labor MP Mr Cheeseman was defending that amount of money, although he could not explain that amount of money. \$30.4 million for that ambulance station, and there is no accountability or transparency for the Victorian taxpayer to understand how that ambulance station cost \$30.4 million. How? We need to understand what on earth is happening around these procurement issues, around the contracts that are being put in place by the government, by the Victorian Health Building Authority and the work they are doing in building these public infrastructure assets, and understand how that money is being spent, because it is a lot of money. It must be gold plated to have \$30.4 million spent on it.

While I am talking about the transparency, we have had in recent days a shocking story about alleged fraud and embezzlement in the payroll department of Ambulance Victoria, an issue that was known by Ambulance Victoria not for a couple of weeks or a couple of months but for many months – 18 months. They have had a private investigator in there looking at all this, looking at what is happening in their payroll where millions of dollars were embezzled by employees. I was first alerted to this by the father of a paramedic who wrote to me some time ago. This really sparked my attention, and I did raise it in the house at one point. It was sent to the Minister for Health too. I do not think he ever got a response from her, but I certainly did and I followed up and hence I started to dig. He said:

Have you any idea of the effect the incompetency of the payroll department at Ambulance Victoria ... is having on its employees?

My daughter, now a single mum, through no choice of her own, a MICA paramedic, single responder is now \$3,200 out of pocket, because of the inability of the AV payroll department to properly record her shifts and apply the pay rates appropriate to those shifts and the hours of overtime that she has worked?

This, as he went on to say, was not a one-off occurrence; it happened regularly. As was highlighted to me, the complaints were going in via these paramedics, who were doing their work, putting in their time sheets for the work that they were doing, and yet they were being short-changed. Those complaints were by not one person but dozens. Goodness knows how many paramedics were making complaints. It was all looked over – ‘Nothing to see here.’ When the news finally broke we got some lame excuse from the Premier and the health minister. It is not good enough for the executive of AV to not be undertaking what they need to do to get to the bottom of paying our paramedics properly. Also, what is happening to taxpayers money? They are actually paying for those employees – and for their pay, I might add, as well.

There are more issues I unfortunately do not have the time to go into on this issue. I do think an inquiry needs to look into the issues around various procurement episodes and systems that are in place but also this issue that I referred to around the fraud and embezzlement, because I have no faith in the government doing any independent review whatsoever. It will be an absolute whitewash and ‘Nothing to see here’, and I think the Victorian public deserves to have full transparency around what on earth has happened, how it got to that point, how long it has been going on for and what we need to do to fix it up.

The other issue I wanted to talk about was the governance and accountability element of this motion. This is a very important agency. It does extremely important work for the Victorian community. We need it to be strong and robust. We need it to be working as effectively as it possibly can. This motion is not going after any one individual. It is looking at what is happening within the organisation so that we can fix it, because it is having an impact on patients. It is putting the lives of patients at risk, and it is certainly having a big impact on the morale of our paramedics. When you speak to paramedics, they say that morale has never been so low. They are worn out and they are exhausted, but they are also frustrated because they know the issues that are occurring and they feel like they are not being listened to. They want it fixed too because when it gets fixed they can actually do the work that they have been trained to do and that they want to do. They want to care for sick and very significantly ill Victorians who may need their care at a time of need or indeed in a time of emergency.

What really concerns me is if our system is so stretched and under so much pressure, there are so many issues that are really not insignificant issues. They are very significant issues within Ambulance Victoria, and we have this very regular occurrence of having very limited availability of ambulances on the road to care for Victorians, wherever that may be across the state. Even in terms of what is happening with not only our on-road but our fixed-wing and chopper air ambulances as well, we need to ensure that it is all operating and working sufficiently. When you have got 1 per cent availability and when you have got 167 ambulances ramped outside hospitals, there is a massive problem. What is concerning to these paramedics and others is if we are operating like this all the time, what would happen if we had – God forbid – a disaster, a massive requirement where we needed these emergency vehicles to be attending to some horrific or tragic event? I do not want that to occur, obviously, but the reality is that big accidents happen, other incidents occur, and you need a huge response.

They are saying, ‘How do we deal with that, when 1 per cent of the fleet is available and that’s business as usual?’ That is a really terrifying thought, and I think that is what concerns me and many paramedics around their ability to be able to respond to the needs of the Victorian community. There are some issues around the governance and accountability in relation to addressing these issues. We do not need things papered over. We do not need things to be covered up as the government constantly talks about funding. But when you have got funding that is being embezzled, where you have got contracts that are being awarded at \$30.4 million and there is no understanding of how that money has actually been spent, Victorians deserve to have better governance over the operation of not only the practical nature of Ambulance Victoria but also those issues internally that I have spoken of.

As I said, there have been some issues around the morale of Ambulance Victoria and the occupational health and safety impacts. I mentioned the WorkSafe investigation into a workplace in Ballarat. The government could not resolve that, so they shut the office down and moved the workers to Melbourne.

That is how they are responding to these areas where there are problems in the workplace. I do not think that is at all satisfactory. I think that is a cop-out. Why are we having multiple WorkSafe officers going over there and giving PINs and the government and others are just saying, 'Nothing to see here, and by the way, we'll move those workers elsewhere so we can just paper over it'? That is a cover-up. That is a cover-up of a workplace that is not safe and has been identified as not being safe, and what do the government and AV do? They move the workers.

Unless we know the extent of what is going on with all of these issues that I have mentioned, we are not going to fix the problem, and it is going to put Victorian lives at risk. They are already at risk when you have only got 1 per cent of ambulances available or when you have got no ambulances available between Mildura and Melbourne. That is a very long distance, and it is a very concerning aspect of what is happening.

I know the government does not want this inquiry. I would say to them, 'Don't be afraid of this inquiry. Support it. Use it as an opportunity to look at the issues and to fix the problems.' We have got very significant problems in this state right across health, and Ambulance Victoria is no different from any issues within the health system. I say to the government: you need to support this inquiry so we can get it up and get some understanding of the true extent of the issues and provide some solutions, because as the government, you are not doing a very good job and the issues are just getting worse. I urge everyone to support this important motion.

Ryan Batchelor: On a point of order, Acting President, I just seek your guidance. Ms Crozier's motion, in seeking to refer a matter to the Legal and Social Issues Committee, sets out relevant terms of reference in the scope of the inquiry. There is a part of the language of the motion which may presuppose some matters that the committee might then find in the course of its inquiry. President Atkinson in 2013, on page 157 of *Rulings from the Chair*, spoke about the importance of motions not presupposing, pre-empting or being prejudicial to the outcomes of an inquiry. I am concerned that the words 'the core issues impacting' presuppose that those are impacting the management and functions of Ambulance Victoria, and that it might be beneficial to the Legal and Social Issues Committee, of which I am a member – and we would have the task of undertaking this inquiry – to be able to do so without those words in the motion that have the potential to prejudice or pre-empt the outcome. I am just seeking some guidance there, and I am happy to –

Georgie CROZIER: On the point of order, Acting President, I think what Mr Batchelor is referring to is the allegations of fraud – correct? – and the investigation on that.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Well, what are you referring to? Because there is nothing untoward in this inquiry. If you are –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Impacting? We are talking about the core issues impacting the management and functions of Ambulance Victoria. There are many issues that are actually impacting the functions and management of Ambulance Victoria. So I am seeking some clarity.

Ryan Batchelor: Further to the point of order, Acting President, I am not suggesting that the issues enumerated in (1) to (6) are or are not relevant. I think it would be for the committee to determine whether they are or are not relevant, and that would be the purpose of having the inquiry. I raise this not because of this particular issue but because at the moment we as members of the Council have a number of inquiries before us. There are many referrals being made to the standing committees of the Council – I sit on many of those committees – and it is helpful for that process –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Ryan Batchelor: You asked a question, and I am trying to explain why I am raising it. It is helpful for the committee to make sure that the terms of reference that come to it give it a level playing field or a broad scope. I am concerned that the words ‘the core issues impacting’ presupposes that those are the core issues, and I think it would be helpful if those words were not in the motion.

Georgie CROZIER: I say again that I do not believe there is a point of order, but in relation to the motion, these are the issues. The terms of reference are very clear around the core issues impacting the management and function, and I have listed them. I could have listed some more and been more specific, but in the interests of the house I have just left them as those six points. I do believe the terms of reference are in order given the way that I have worded them.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): My ruling in relation to this is that procedurally the motion is in order, and if the house wishes to make an amendment, it may choose to do so.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (14:27): I now rise to speak on the substance of the motion, and I will obviously get to the substance of the interchange on the point of order. I will do that in a minute.

Ms Crozier has raised important matters. Ambulance Victoria and the provision of ambulance services in the state of Victoria are an incredibly important part of our health system. Our paramedics do an outstanding job in responding to Victorians who need help, who need assistance, and they do so all day, every day and all night, every night – they are available when they are needed. What is also clear is that over the terms of this government, the Labor government has invested considerably to support our ambulance services. We have invested in them since the day we were elected, ending the war that the previous government had with the paramedics and ambulance services. We put an additional \$2 billion into our ambulance services, which has seen the on-road workforce in Ambulance Victoria increase by over 50 per cent since we came to government. The result of that investment was that until the pandemic we had some of the best response times on record – 10 per cent higher than what we inherited when we came to office – and the investment, the care and the attention that the Labor government put into our ambulance services were clearly demonstrating that it was delivering.

Obviously there was a significant event with the pandemic – a significant health event that has had significant ramifications for many in our community and many institutions in our community. The ongoing effects of that pandemic are being felt in a wide range of areas. One of those is that the demand for ambulance services, for our paramedics, is currently now 35 per cent higher than prepandemic levels. The most recent quarter was the biggest quarter in the history of Ambulance Victoria. There has been significant investment, a global health event sending shock waves across the community and massively increased demand for our ambulance services, yet this year we are seeing our paramedics arriving 27 seconds faster, which is a small amount of time in the grand scheme of things, but in a statistical sense it is very important to see that response times have improved year on year.

This government is absolutely committed to continuing to support our ambulance services. We do so wholeheartedly and consistently. As I said, we have increased the number of on-road staff at Ambulance Victoria by more than 50 per cent. There are over 2200 more paramedics on our roads. Since 2015 we have delivered 35 new ambulance stations across the state, with another 16 in planning. Those new ambulance stations are important for improving the working conditions of our paramedics and our ambulance services staff and for ensuring that the environment in which our life-saving emergency care workers and emergency response workers work is first class, is world class.

This year’s budget provided an additional \$146 million to support a range of operational priorities for Ambulance Victoria, including medium-acuity transport services and expanding Ambulance Victoria’s secondary triage. That together is a demonstration of our commitment and our investment, but you cannot just see the support we are providing to our paramedics, our ambulances and Ambulance Victoria in terms of the investment we are making just in that organisation and in that service. Across the health system what we are also doing is investing in ways to get treatment and

support to those who might be thinking that they need to call an ambulance, providing them with more accessible ways of accessing health care first, to check. That is really the role that Victoria's new nation-leading Victorian Virtual Emergency Department is doing. It is giving people who might think about picking up the phone and calling an ambulance the opportunity to speak with a health professional through the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department before they pick up the phone, allowing the capacity that exists within Ambulance Victoria to be directed to the most acute cases of need. The virtual ED has seen a diversion rate of 87 per cent in the last quarter. Our response times are better than comparable jurisdictions, particularly those in New South Wales, and we have got more paramedics per head of population than any other jurisdiction in the country, well above the national average. This is undoubtedly a government that is supporting and investing in our ambulance services.

But there is demand. Of course there is demand, and what we see right across our health sector is that, particularly since the global pandemic, in the last couple of years there has been increased demand for ambulance services and for our paramedics; there is increased demand for our health services. That is why we are investing so much in our health services. That is why Labor will always support our paramedics and Labor will always support our health services, and we will support them with investment in the workforce, in facilities and in infrastructure.

Obviously, as I said, there is demand. Ms Crozier's motion today seeks to establish an inquiry and ask the Legal and Social Issues Committee to look at a range of factors relevant to the management and functions of Ambulance Victoria. Prior to my contribution I raised a point of order trying to clarify some words that I thought might have, in framing the terms of reference sent to the Legal and Social Issues Committee, pre-empted some of the matters that were the core issues impacting on the management and functions of Ambulance Victoria. The reason I take issue with this, and it may seem somewhat pedantic, is it is important for committees in exercising our functions to do so in a way that is both in reality and in perception free of any kind of predetermined outcome. The committees need to actually and in perception approach the task in front of them without predetermined points of view, without predetermined positions. I think the experience that many of us have had on parliamentary committees in the course of this Parliament – I am new to the Parliament this parliamentary session – is that we are working at our best when we come with an open mind and we look at the evidence before us. I think we have demonstrated the ability across the chamber to do that work, which is why I think it is important, and incumbent upon those who bring motions to this place to set up further referrals to inquiries, that we do so in a way that presents them as objectively as we possibly can and sets the inquiry field as neutrally as we possibly can. Therefore I would like to move an amendment to Ms Crozier's motion. I move:

That the words 'the core issues impacting' be omitted.

We will circulate that amendment. In moving it we are just seeking to make sure that the consideration that the Legal and Social Issues Committee will give to this matter, should the chamber agree at the conclusion of the debate to the referral, is given in a way that is open and objective. Certainly that is the approach that as a member of that committee I would absolutely and fundamentally welcome. Should this inquiry be given to us, I am sure we will do a very thorough job of examining the matters before it, and I think that the small change that I am suggesting to the terms of reference will help us achieve that. And with that, I might leave my remarks there.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (14:37): The Greens will be supporting this motion today, although we hope that by the time the inquiry rolls around, the issues that it seeks to address will be resolved or there will at least be a clearer pathway towards the resolution. Can I say at the outset that we recognise how hard people right across this system work – whether it is the call takers, the paramedics or those who work in our EDs, everyone is doing their best. Even relevant government departments and the minister, I think, have a genuine desire to do the best for Victorians in terms of the ambulance system.

But it is undeniable that Victoria's ambulance system is under immense pressure. This is less due to a lack of good intention and more the result of intractably poor system organisation – both the ambulance system itself and the broader health system. We have long been hearing from paramedics on the ground about challenges they are facing and moreover the difficulties that they are having in finding a way to resolve these. In particular, poor rostering practices and inadequate call-taking, dispatch and triage systems are driving a misallocation of resources and feeding pervasive low morale and burnout. Ambulances that could and should be on the road attending to people with emergencies are being diverted to inappropriate jobs because of the rigidity of the triage system used by call takers. While the strictly protocolised system that we have reduces the risk of a patient's urgency being underestimated, it does mean that many clearly non-urgent cases are being forced to have a lights-and-sirens ambulance response. Missing an urgent case can easily turn into tragedy, and it is understandable why no-one would want that to occur. But the flip side of being overly inclusive and cautious is that this approach spreads finite resources too thinly, so then ambulances are not available to attend those who need them most and so then tragedies can and have occurred as a result.

To illustrate what this is like for a paramedic on the ground, I have been told of a case where paramedics were made to attend a toothache, knowing it was a toothache but having no ability to exercise any discretion, because the call takers had to categorise jaw pain as the same urgency as a potential cardiac chest pain since cardiac pain can be felt in the jaw and that is what their algorithm told them they had to do. Then while they were attending this case, they were hearing about a genuinely urgent call on their radio that they could not get to. This is the sort of thing that they are talking about when they are saying it contributes to low morale. Also there is widespread acknowledgement that there is an issue, but from the paramedics' perspective there does not seem to be any meaningful progress to resolve it. We know that getting the balance right with the call-taking triage and dispatch system is really difficult. We appreciate that this is a sticky issue for the government, its agencies and paramedics. We also do not know how frequent this sort of example that I have provided is occurring, given we are largely relying on anecdotes, but at the very least our paramedics are experiencing these issues frequently enough to regularly contact us about them.

In the absence of another path forward perhaps an inquiry provides an opportunity to get a proper sense of the scale of these sorts of problems and develop some options to overcome them. But even with better triaging and dispatch systems the reality is that people are getting sicker and we are seeing more demand for acute health care. There is not just one factor driving this. It is symptomatic of a whole society that is not geared towards keeping people healthy. It is not about the amount of money that is spent on health care, although spending more money on health care is always a good thing. It is a good investment from my perspective. But the whole approach that governments take to thinking about the health of our population is not right. There will never be enough hospital beds if we keep going the way we are. We are trapped in a vicious cycle of more sick people needing more acute services, and this will not end until we see a major shift in priorities from state and federal governments.

Foremost, we need to massively increase our preventative health spend and look at this in a holistic way right across government. Urban planning that promotes physical activity; fresh, nutritious, affordable food; adequate housing; clean air; reducing alcohol and gambling harms; reducing stress that comes from poverty and extreme financial pressure – these are all examples of things that have a huge impact on our health but are never considered that way. To put it another way: if people could more readily afford a roof over their heads and put food on the table, you would see a lot less sick people. Although we do not always like to think about it, COVID has not gone away either, and it is still driving significantly higher demand for health care. This is not just about deferred care. There is an ongoing increase in demand due to both acute infection and the longer term risks of COVID like cardiac events and strokes. Obviously returning to lockdowns and mask mandates might not be on the cards, but other measures to reduce the burden of COVID should still be a priority for this government.

We also need more investment in community-based care: primary care, dental care, specialist outpatients, in-home care and medical care in aged care facilities. If people can receive the care that they need in home or in the community before they get really sick, they will not need an ambulance or a hospital bed in the first place. That is better for everyone, not to mention a whole lot cheaper. If they do need to go to hospital, with more community-based care, people can get out of hospital faster, freeing up beds for those who actually need them, which makes it easier for people to move out of emergency and up into a hospital bed, which then means we do not get the ramping issues that we are seeing. Yet investing in these sorts of issues, investing in these parts of the health system, is simply never prioritised, because they are not a kneejerk response to negative press, and investing in them does not allow for making flashy announceables or cutting a ribbon. While this inquiry is very unlikely to focus on these kinds of issues, I will continue to use every opportunity I get in this place to point out the desperate need to focus on health promotion, prevention and community-based care because it is the root cause of many of the other problems we end up debating here.

With respect to the other issues that this inquiry will focus on, including those related to governance, these are once again issues that have been raised with us by paramedics over a long period of time. We recognise that the government is aware of these and that there are many processes underway to try and address them. We sincerely hope that that work continues to progress regardless of the outcome of the vote on this motion, as the shared objective here should be to have a happy and healthy paramedic workforce and ambulance services that best meet Victorians' needs. We also recognise that there is a risk that comes with inquiries – that the public airing of grievances may further impact morale. However, that is already happening. Without an inquiry we already have these issues being aired regularly in the media highlighting these problems. At the very least with an inquiry there is a constructive purpose working towards an understanding of the problems and developing some practical recommendations.

Paramedics need to have confidence in the system that they work in; we all need to have confidence in the system that they are working in, and the reality is at the moment many of them do not. For that reason, once again, the Greens will be supporting this inquiry motion today.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:45): I am pleased to stand and speak on motion 520 from my colleague Georgie Crozier. Naturally, Ambulance Victoria is one of the most essential of essential services; I cannot think of any other organisation that has a more immediate effect on the lives of Victorians, and having a successful, well-functioning ambulance service can perhaps have no higher priority in this place. I have a nephew who is a paramedic. I know firsthand from his anecdotes and stories exactly how hardworking and how devoted our ambulance workers and paramedics are.

There is one very strong hallmark of any organisation that is in trouble and struggling bad, and that is when an organisation loses the ability to reform itself. I think we see that with Ambulance Victoria now, because what we have are endemic problems, systemic problems, problems with basic governance, problems with basic accountability and problems in the culture itself, and as per the terms of reference of the proposed inquiry, there are many other issues as well. When we talk about endemic, the issues of call taking and dispatch, ambulance ramping and the incredible working hours that we expect our paramedics to perform are not new issues; they are endemic issues. These are issues that the organisation itself has not been able to reform. When we talk about systemic, we know that the procurement practices, the contract management, the oversights and the adequacy to ensure transparency and fairness and value for public funds have problems as well. They are systemic problems. They are not problems that the organisation has been able to resolve internally or with the government over years.

Then we come to the allegations of fraud and embezzlement and the adequacy of government controls and oversight to prevent that kind of misconduct. Now we are talking about basic organisational governance that any organisation, whether they are public or private, must abide by. If your systems internally are breaking down there, that is a very, very strong canary in the coalmine that the

organisation has some genuine fundamental problems. This fraud has been going on for years. As someone who worked in financial services, if people collude within an organisation, you cannot prevent a fraud, but you must have the systems to identify a fraud once it has occurred. If your organisation's internal governance has broken down to the extent that you do not have the systems and the governance and the oversight where you can identify the fraud and you do not identify it for a number of years – that is, you have gone through audits, you have gone through financial years, you are out the other side and you still have not identified it – then you have a genuine governance problem within your organisation that you need to address. Again, this is systematic; this is a number of years.

Once an organisation has lost the ability to reform itself, it is in genuine trouble, and you must then look deeply at why. Why is it breaking down internally, why is it no longer meeting the goals to which it subscribes and what are both the internal and the external factors that make that so? That is why an inquiry is important. We are not just talking about the internal factors; we are talking about the external factors, and in order to objectively look at those external factors you need an inquiry. A government simply reviewing itself is really an internal review. It does not give the objectivity or the scrutiny that this requires.

This problem manifests in many ways. It manifests in our lives, and we have all heard the statistics of ambulance ramping, the lack of availability and the effect on lives. For every large headline tragedy that there is, and there are too many of those, we know there are many, many tiny tragedies from people waiting for an ambulance in a time of crisis and trauma. There are many, many families whose problems go on many years beyond because of our failure to address the inherent problems that we have got here. I would like to take up my Greens colleague's comments on community health and early intervention. I think this is a really excellent example because there is a fantastic organisation in Riddells Creek called HMS Community paramedics. They do the early intervention with qualified paramedics who are not in the ambulance system, who are retired or have stepped down for any other reason. They estimate that they take 40 ambulance trips off the road per day with the work they do, because they go and change the bandage or they go and dispense the pill. This organisation and a few others similar to them have been banging on the door of government to say, 'Let us have a role. Let us have a large role because we are a large part of that solution,' and I really believe in that as a solution.

This inquiry is a wonderful opportunity for us to get people like that to the table and help them be part of the solution, because that is what we want. We want a solution. If it cannot reform itself, it needs help to be reformed. We need an inquiry to do that. If we all go in with a positive mindset that we are looking out for the interests of Victorians, we can do so.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:51): I also rise to speak on the motion which has been put forward to us today, motion 520 by Ms Crozier. At the outset, as I suspect all members have already done, I wish to express my acknowledgement of and my appreciation for the amazing, amazing work that our paramedics do each and every day. Any of us who have been perhaps unfortunate by circumstance but fortunate by their presence and have had to deal with them over any time knows about, without a shadow of a doubt, their professionalism and the way they go about doing their work. I want to especially acknowledge them today and indeed other health services workers, be they in the emergency rooms in the hospitals or in the call centres in Triple Zero Victoria. I particularly appreciated the chance to catch up with a good friend of mine who works in that space just recently as well and hear firsthand some of her perspectives of that element.

I think I will be now the third speaker in a row to say that our ambulance system does not operate in a vacuum. It operates in a broader system right from, at the very earliest, those health prevention measures, from those community campaigns right through to the call centres, through to the ambulances themselves and the incredible work that our paramedics do, be they regular or MICA or other sorts of paramedics, through to of course the hospital system. It is important that we note that in context when we discuss the quite frankly dramatic investments that have been made by this government and will continue to be made and will need to continue to be made. They will absolutely continue to be made for our hardworking paramedics and for all who work in and receive care from

our broader healthcare system. It is why we have seen record investment in hospitals in this state. It is why we saw ambulance response times, since coming into government, go from some of the lowest on record to some of the highest on record – the best response times on record prior to the pandemic. It is why this government is invested and committed to delivering those outcomes again and working with our health services to get the best outcomes we can, obviously for them but also critically for the wider Victorian community.

It is also why just last week we announced a further major investment into our hospital networks to ensure that they have the resources that they need to deal with the dramatic increase that we have indeed seen just this year in case loads right across our health system. When you look at the state government's investment in priority primary care centres, again we are stepping in where the federal government failed to do its job quite a few years ago. When you look at the other extreme end in hospitals, providing those resources will make a difference. I know one thing that will make a very significant difference in my community is the recently announced expansion of the Casey Hospital emergency room. This is a significant project that is going to make a very big difference for my local community in the south-east. Casey is a wonderful hospital. It is a very fast growing hospital, as it should be because it is in a very fast growing region of Victoria.

We are also served by many other wonderful hospitals in the Monash Health network, including the Monash Medical Centre, Dandenong Hospital, Monash Children's Hospital and of course the outstanding nation-leading Victorian Heart Hospital, which is in that Monash Health network as well. They all service the Casey–Cardinia region, but within Casey–Cardinia itself, a region which now has a population roughly equivalent to the size of Tasmania's, Casey Hospital, as that first point of call, that local hospital, has been doing some great work. It is really important that we continue to invest, which is why I am so pleased to see the expansion of the emergency room at Casey Hospital, which will effectively double the capacity of that emergency room which will again help the broader healthcare system, including ambulances coming into the emergency room, making sure that that can be done as efficiently as possible.

Indeed, as well, we have the major redevelopment of Frankston Hospital in the south-east. It will be the largest hospital by some measure outside of central Melbourne – a very, very significant new hospital for this community in Frankston in the south-east. I believe my colleague Mr McIntosh referred to it as being in eastern Victoria this morning, and I will take this opportunity to correct him and say that, while it does serve his constituency in eastern Victoria, it is one in the heart of Frankston in the south-east.

Through this job, as many other members have in this place, I have had many wonderful opportunities to meet with our hardworking paramedics, be it in my own region or be it across the state. In fact I had some wonderful conversations with paramedics when we were having our regional sitting in Echuca. They came by to express their views, as they have every right to, and it was genuinely a very good opportunity for me to hear firsthand from them as well. I am very grateful to them for taking the time to run through with me and some other members – I see Mr Ettershank; I think he was there as well – their firsthand experiences and how we can do our very best for them. I am very much looking forward to seeing the continued progress when it comes to the Ambulance Victoria enterprise bargaining agreement, and I know that our very hardworking Minister for Health Mary-Anne Thomas is very focused on this as well. I thank her for her continued efforts to get a very good outcome, which I hope to see soon for our paramedics.

Also I have had many opportunities to meet with paramedics in my region many times, but most memorably perhaps of late was at the opening of the brand new Clyde North ambulance branch. With the huge growing area that we do have in the south-east – and as we do have across many corners of the state – it is vitally important that we continue to invest in the infrastructure that our growing suburbs need, and the Clyde North ambulance station is already servicing the community extremely well. In fact by the time of the official opening, which was some several months after the actual opening of the branch, we actually saw that something like 2000 cases had already been attended to just by that unit –

as they do working with colleagues from other nearby branches and with the support from MICA paramedics and others as well. It was really quite terrific to see that branch already providing significant use and value to the community.

It is important that we do focus on continuing what is absolutely a very strong investment by this Labor government over 10 years. With a refreshed enthusiasm under our new Premier Jacinta Allan as well, it is important that we continue that work and continue to support our healthcare workers in every setting: in the ambulances, in the call centres, in the hospitals, in the primary support services and in the preventative health services too. That all goes some very great way to improving the workload of ambulance workers and paramedics. I also note Dr Mansfield's comments in relation to some of the way cases are triaged and how perhaps that could be improved as well and ensuring that all of the people dealing with members of the public have the best support and the best resources available so that when they do make those decisions they can be ensuring that we are getting the most effective use out of our critical emergency workers and that we are not unduly burdening them. It is a very hard line to walk of course, because you do not want to see anything which would lead to a disastrously adverse outcome for someone, but it is something that the majority of our health workforce are very equipped at doing. Whatever we can do to support them in doing that as effectively as possible so that our paramedics can be focusing on the core business they are there for is something that needs to be absolutely supported.

Just some final notes: I will add my voice of support to the remarks of my colleague Mr Batchelor. In talking about the committee process, it is very important for us to remember that this is a process that should not be beset by predetermined outcomes – again, real or preperceived. A very important part of our parliamentary process is the role of parliamentary committees and the inquiries they undertake, so I voice my support for his amendment too, which goes some measure towards making the motion before us today and the terms of reference under the proposed inquiry significantly less politically predetermined. Again, this is a very important topic, so I did want to focus my remarks on what I focused on. I could spend a great deal of time highlighting the contrast with what we have seen from those opposite, not least when they privatised the Cranbourne ambulance service when they were in government once. But I think it is important to focus on the work that our healthcare workers do, and I am very much proud to be part of a government that is continuing to support our wonderful paramedics.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (15:01): I rise to speak in support of this motion today and plan to do so very briefly because I am aware that there are plenty of members around the chamber who want to get their position on the record. But I am doing this today because I believe the state of Ambulance Victoria right now is simply untenable and it does not hurt for it to have some scrutiny by the Parliament through this very sensible motion today.

I feel like I have a unique understanding of the ambulance system after being in a relationship with a paramedic for 12 years. I think that it really shows just how dire the situation is right now that I was with him under the Napthine government when the ambulance system was at its absolute worst. The Liberals lost an election arguably on that issue, and I would say his morale at work is worse right now than it was back then. We need the ambulance service to function efficiently to ensure that we save the lives of Victorians, and the government should be in support of that. In my area in Northern Victoria, in a regional area, we know that our health system is already strained and it is already stretched. Many areas around not just the Macedon Ranges, where my office is, but other parts of northern Victoria that are even more regional do not have ambulance services right now, and it is putting so many Victorians' lives at risk.

It is clear that Ambulance Victoria is broken, and the government must resuscitate the ambulance service, not just because it is the right thing to do but because Victorian lives depend on it. Paramedics describe it to me, as I said, as the worst time in their entire careers. They describe a slow deterioration that needs to be rectified so that we can support them in order to do their job and in order to do it well, and to protect the health and safety of all of the people that live in this state. They tell me they are

drowning under the strain of unprecedented workloads – ramping, emergency resources being unnecessarily over-triaged for minor conditions and their being at risk of physical and psychological injuries. I know that the government is doing some things in order to address this, but it is simply trimming around the edges and not fixing the broader issue at hand.

I know Ms Crozier touched on this, but just last night 99 per cent of ambulances were unavailable to respond to the community, just on a normal Tuesday evening – no emergency, no unprecedented event, just a normal Tuesday evening – and this is not a rare occurrence right now. It is burning out our paramedics, and it should highlight just how desperate the situation has become. While paramedics are seeking improved pay and working conditions right now, this inquiry is so much more than that, and that is actually not the biggest issue or their biggest complaint. That is what they are saying to me. It is about fixing the fundamental broken systems within Ambulance Victoria to ensure that our paramedics are supported to do their job of saving lives. Dr Mansfield touched on this, and we know that the government and Ambulance Victoria already have processes and procedures in place and investigations occurring, but this inquiry is just a safeguard around that.

It will be the best case scenario if in a year's time we commence this inquiry and the submission process opens and everyone can rock up and say, 'Problem solved.' But in my mind, knocking this inquiry back today could mean running the risk that when we reach the time when the inquiry would be taking place the situation has potentially gotten worse and we do not have this opportunity again. I commend this motion to the house, and I hope that many others across the chamber can join me in supporting our paramedics today.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (15:05): I rise to speak in support of this motion, and I appreciate the work of Georgie Crozier presenting this with the Liberals and the Nationals. I guess it is interesting to look at the Ambulance Victoria website, because it does state:

Most importantly, if Victorians have an emergency and you need an ambulance, you will get one.

The challenge at the moment is that we are not always getting one, particularly in rural and regional areas. But I do want to start by saying – and a number of us have mentioned it – how much we appreciate the work of paramedics and MICA. I had a very close family member whose life was actually saved earlier this year because of the quick thinking of a MICA paramedic. But I guess I have also heard from people who have called 000 and have not had the assistance they needed, like a gentleman in Donald who literally needed an ambulance to transport him 200 metres over the road. Unfortunately, it took a couple of hours and the next morning he passed away.

I heard from another member of the Northern Victoria Region, who is based in Bendigo, who had severe pain in her stomach. When she dialled 000 for an ambulance, she was told that she would need to get a taxi to Bendigo Health. That is a major concern. But I guess with any of these issues that people raise with our offices, it can be just the tip of the iceberg. The *Herald Sun* just last month reported that there have been 28,000 taxis booked in regional areas for patients, and again that just highlights the issue that we have in front of us. I had another person locally in Bendigo attend a community forum recently. She mentioned that when she had anaphylaxis and went into shock, she had fire services turn up to assist ahead of the ambulance, which was of major concern to her at the time. We also have heard from people about cross-border issues and the challenge of the call centre not finding the closest ambulance – with the challenge of the interstate issue between New South Wales and Victoria again not being addressed.

Ambulance ramping is happening all the time across regional Victoria. I have seen it. I have seen up to 10 ambulances ramped at Bendigo Health. We know it is an issue in Wodonga. It is an issue in Shepparton. I have spoken with people who know that paramedics are spending up to 25 per cent of their shift just ramping. This is very frustrating. I know Mr Batchelor spoke earlier in his contribution on behalf of the government. He mentioned that the response times have improved, but I question whether or not we have all the data because when I have looked at the Indigo shire, which has had

reportedly some of the worst response times in the state, their code zero data is not for publication. Why are we not seeing that data? Is it that bad?

I had another person recently who needed to get from the Heathcote hospital across to Bendigo Hospital. They were unable to access an ambulance at the time. So another family member, who had driven a long distance, had to drive them to Bendigo Health, where they sat in a wheelchair from 8 am to 7:30 pm, until they were actually admitted for surgery, and they remained in hospital for three days after that.

These are very serious issues, but again we are seeing that ambulances are not available. I have also heard about the workforce shortages and about the challenges with the triage of patients when they arrive from an ambulance – that there is perhaps not the staff to assist with prioritising that triage. That is something that needs to be looked at. Also, with the prioritising and assessment of what category the calls are, call centres are not equipped to reprioritise or redirect that priority. So we do not actually know from the data – there is a lack of accuracy at the moment. Committee inquiries are a fantastic process. They are a very important process because you get to hear from witnesses with all different expert backgrounds, to look into the issues, to examine the issues and to make recommendations.

I know that Labor has put forward on behalf of the government an amendment to remove some of the wording about the core issues, but we will not be accepting that recommendation. It is important, with such a big issue, to have some key areas that you are looking at, but it clearly states in the terms of reference that it is ‘including but not limited to’ so there is the ability of the committee to look into these issues further. But it is so important that we do address the issues that are in front of us today. We have a responsibility because we know when people call an ambulance, when they call 000, they are facing a very serious situation. This inquiry gives a chance for us to look at what recommendations are needed, and this will be of benefit to paramedics, to hospital staff and, most importantly, to the patients who are depending on a service when they call 000. I encourage all the chamber to support this inquiry.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (15:11): This motion gives me an opportunity to set the record straight a little bit and set out the facts and the difference in the approach to health and to, in particular, the ambulance service between those opposite when they were in government and the way of our government and the Labor values that we bring to focusing on health. Ambulance Victoria is at the forefront of an absolutely unprecedented demand on health services, yet at the same time Ambulance Victoria still responds to code 1 emergencies 10 per cent faster than when those opposite were in government. The most recent quarter was Ambulance Victoria’s busiest quarter on record, receiving 102,000 code 1 calls, and the national *Report on Government Services* shows that Victoria has better response times than New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania on all measures, and we are performing better than Queensland on three out of four of those key measures.

When those opposite were last in power, we had a broken, underfunded ambulance service with a then Liberal government waging war with the very people saving our lives. Response times went backwards even without a global pandemic. Instead of addressing the issues, those opposite just stopped releasing ambulance response times and basically hid them away, heads in the sand. More concerning was that this was not just about mismanagement of Ambulance Victoria; it was the contempt shown to paramedics, and I think that is really a terrible shame. They referred to our hardworking paramedics as lazy, greedy, entitled thugs, liars, militants and stooges, and I am sure Ambulance Victoria members have not forgotten the disgraceful insinuation of former Minister for Health David Davis, who falsely accused Ambulance Victoria of staging photos at Frankston emergency department.

Thankfully, in contrast the Allan Labor government is behind our hardworking emergency service personnel. When we came to government in 2014, we stopped the attacks on our hardworking ambulance service members. We improved the response time of code 1 emergencies to 80 per cent within 15 minutes. The response times continued to get better. In 2019 Ambulance Victoria recorded

their best ever response times, prior to the pandemic. It is amazing that such an achievement can be worked through your emergency services when you work with them, not against them. Whilst I am on that, the Allan Labor government has made \$2 billion worth of investment into our ambulance services, and this investment has already seen a 50 per cent increase in Ambulance Victoria's on-road workforce. This year's budget sees an additional \$146 million to support operational priorities for Ambulance Victoria. This \$146 million will ensure that paramedics have the facilities and support they need to respond quickly to emergencies and, most importantly, save Victorian lives. Of that \$146 million, \$27 million will go towards expanding secondary triage, and I acknowledge my colleague Mr Batchelor's comments on this. It is a very interesting process, and it makes enormous sense. Ambulance Victoria's secondary triage is the most comprehensive in the world. Secondary triage contacts less urgent 000 callers and connects them to care options that are better suited to their medical needs. This keeps emergency ambulances free to respond to live threats and events.

We are helping the health system grow to meet this significant demand. Eleven billion dollars has been announced in the budget to allow certainty in our health system, addressing the future needs of patients and service demands. Last week an extra \$1.5 billion was announced by the Allan Labor government to support health needs and health reforms in our health system. Unlike the former Liberal government, we are not about going to war with our frontline ambos or closing or privatising our hospitals. In fact I want to thank our ambos – our paramedics – for the hard work that they do.

I must say that in my entire extended family – cousins and second cousins – there is no-one really in health. I think we probably are best described as a squeamish family. But there are two members that are involved in health, and both of them are in the ambulance service. We are very proud of them. One of them, my cousin, did nursing training, then a year at the Northern Hospital and then went on to study paramedicine at Federation University. Just to see the places in western Victoria that she has worked, the kinds of cases that she comes up against and the challenges that she has faced, I am so proud of the work that she does, and that of all of her colleagues. On top of that, there is all of the after-hours work. It is like when a baby is born. They never come between 9 and 5 – they come in the middle of the night. That is generally when most of the dramas happen healthwise as well. In doing night shifts, like in our hospitals, the ambulance service performs a very, very important role.

I am absolutely blown away by the level of expertise, knowledge and understanding of the human condition that ambos have. They are truly wonderful people who interact with the most diverse range of human beings in our society. They are often doing that at their most stressed time – not the ambos' most stressed time but the person who has rung 000 for help. They are usually incredibly distressed. You could say that 100 per cent of the interactions of our ambulance workers are with people who are incredibly distressed. They are so skilled at calming patients down whilst at the same time conducting assessments and deciding what actions need to be taken. I am constantly amazed at the level of knowledge that they can combine with their beautiful personal style.

I think I will keep my remarks fairly much to that and basically reiterate that the Allan Labor government understands the work of the ambulance service and understands the importance of the ambulance service in the context of the broader health system. In doing that we have invested incredibly in supporting the growth of the ambulance service, in supporting the growth in complexity of the issues that have been developing and also in ensuring their ability to respond to crises like the pandemic, which none of us had experienced in our lifetimes before despite the scientific community pointing out to us that they were surprised we had not had a pandemic before now.

It really is from me a very, very big thankyou to the ambulance service in Victoria for all of the work that they do and for all of the knowledge and care that they bring to their roles. I want to say that we appreciate that there is continued stress and continued pressure as a result of the pandemic. The tail end of that pandemic is continuing at the moment, and it is health services like the ambulance service that are quietly responding to those peaks and troughs of COVID in our community even to this day. I am very proud of the service and the – *(Time expired)*

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (15:21): I will make a very brief contribution, probably pretty much in line with the contribution from Ms Purcell before me. I would like to first of all thank both the government and the opposition for the briefings that they provided on this motion. I think it is clear that all parties recognise the challenges that confront not simply our ambulance service but the health industry as a whole, whether that be our rapidly growing population, workforce shortages or post-COVID bulges in demand. At the same time I guess it is also really hard sometimes to get clarity as to the nature of the problem. There is so much noise in the public domain, for want of a better term – some of it valid, some of it overblown. It is very hard I think for many people to get a sense of exactly how the situation is within the service.

I can come at this with a fairly direct and personal focus. About six weeks ago, on a Thursday evening, my wife had a very bad fall at home and she sustained a significant head injury. I will not go into the gruesome details, but let us just say there was a lot of blood. We live about 10 minutes from the Royal Melbourne Hospital and the wait time for the ambulance was just under 1 hour, at which point in time we were attended by three magnificent ambos, a MICA paramedic and a two-person ambulance crew, who were just superb. They handled the situation with incredible compassion and professionalism. They then got to drive off on this quiet Thursday evening for a 5½-hour wait ramped at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, which was then followed by 19½ hours in the emergency department trying to get a bed. Based on a random sample of one, I would have to say that clearly the ambulance service is profoundly challenged. In making those comments, I would like to make it abundantly clear that in terms of both the ambos and the hospital staff they were just totally professional and committed, and I have nothing but admiration for those health professionals.

But if there was any doubt in my mind as to the severity of the situation that confronts us – and like many people in this chamber, I have spoken to a range of ambos and paramedics – clearly the system is broken and there needs to be things done. I think there is agreement within this chamber that things do need to be done. I am also aware that in saying that, there is no magic bullet that will fix the health industry or that will fix the ambulance service, because quite clearly there are major changes in terms of demand – a growing population, ageing population – that are putting major constraints on effective service delivery. That said, when I hear statements from some members here that actually things are getting better, I do find that a little challenging to accept. I am also aware that there is a lot happening between the government, health providers, the ambulance union and other key stakeholders. Those are important changes, and we wish the government and those stakeholders every success in trying to address them. I think Ms Purcell raised this before. The reality is this inquiry is not going to hit the deck for the best part of a year. I think it would be a wonderful thing if, when we come to that point, it is all fixed, but I do not think it will be. So we would suggest that given that timeframe, this is a good motion to support. It is a good thing to put a flag in the ground. We would also say, given the timeframe, there is absolutely no reason why the prospect of this inquiry should in any way interfere with important things like the enterprise bargaining agreement negotiations with the union and other systemic reforms that the government is seeking to implement. On this basis Legalise Cannabis will be supporting the motion, and we commend it to the chamber.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (15:26): I rise to support Ms Crozier's motion and thank her for the work that she has done on this issue in particular but all also to thank all of my colleagues, less the government, for their contributions. We will not be supporting Mr Batchelor's amendment, in particular, attempting sneakily to narrow the scope of this inquiry. The subject of this is not predetermining an outcome; it is actually looking into the core issues of what is going wrong. You literally had on Monday 99 per cent of ambulances unavailable. There was recently one MICA intensive care paramedic between Melbourne and Mildura. This is the extent of the issues.

I have chatted to a lot of my local ambulances and had long conversations with them. I know many other Labor members in the Northern Metropolitan Region have refused to meet with the ambulances. I have met with them, particularly the Craigieburn branch. The government spent millions of dollars on a new ambulance station in Yuroke, 3 kilometres up the road from the Craigieburn ambulance

station. It was promised to be a 24-hour facility, right? And instead of providing additional resources to this new ambulance station, all they have done is pinch the night shift from Craigieburn ambulance station and put it over there, which means during the day it is completely empty. They have had robberies. They have had people breaking in. It is not resourced at all, which goes to show their contempt of growth area communities – absolute mismanagement. We have seen staff working shifts up to 19 hours and then being expected to drive home. That is just irresponsible. We have definitely seen, especially in the northern suburbs, shifts dropped and not picked up, which is not great at all. So I support Ms Crozier's motion.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:29): In the interest of time, I want to just sum up very briefly. I want to thank those members for speaking and for also sharing their own personal stories and understanding the real impacts of how the ambulance service is working – the difficulties and challenges that they have – and understanding that there are some real issues impacting the delivery of services. Could I say that, in relation to the government's amendment, as Mrs Broad has said, the coalition will not be supporting it. We need to understand those issues, those very core issues, of how the organisation is functioning and working and how that is impacting on the delivery of services – the management and the function of Ambulance Victoria itself – so we will not be supporting the government's amendment. I urge all members to support this motion so that we can look at those issues and ensure that the Parliament does its work in providing significant recommendations to improve Ambulance Victoria services in the interests of all Victorians.

Council divided on amendment:

Ayes (13): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (23): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaele Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, David Ettershank, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Amendment negatived.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (23): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaele Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, David Ettershank, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (13): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:40): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 462, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

*Motions***Housing**

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (15:40): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that:
 - (a) the Victorian Labor government has recently signed a \$100 million contract with John Holland for the demolition of five public housing towers including three in North Melbourne and Flemington;
 - (b) hundreds of residents remain living at these three public housing tower sites, many of whom do not want to leave their homes and communities;
- (2) acknowledges that the demolition contracts have been signed without residents receiving any commitment from the government about their right of return to public housing;
- (3) recognises that Labor:
 - (a) has signed these demolition contracts without any plan for what happens next or any guarantee that public housing will be rebuilt at each site, in order to forcibly evict residents from their homes using a legal pathway;
 - (b) has used this tactic to evict public housing residents before, including at Barak Beacon where residents fought the government to remain in their homes but were eventually evicted;
 - (c) is treating public housing residents in these high-rise estates with contempt which has left many residents feeling deeply distressed about their future;
- (4) notes with concern residents' reports that they have felt pressured and coerced to accept the limited alternative housing options provided by Homes Victoria, leaving residents fearful that they will face homelessness if they do not accept the offer from the government;

and calls for a moratorium on evictions of residents from these towers so residents cannot be forced to move out of their homes against their will.

The motion asks this house to note that the Victorian Labor government has recently signed a \$100 million contract with John Holland for the demolition of five public housing towers, including three towers in North Melbourne and Flemington, located at 120 Racecourse Road, Flemington, 12 Holland Court, Flemington, and 33 Alfred Street, North Melbourne. It further notes that hundreds of residents remain living at these three public housing tower sites, many of whom do not want to leave their homes and communities. Two, it acknowledges that the demolition contracts have been signed without residents receiving any commitment from the government about their right of return to public housing. Three, it recognises that Labor has signed these demolition contracts without any plan for what happens next or any guarantee that public housing will be rebuilt at each site, in order to forcibly evict residents from their homes using a legal pathway; recognises that Labor has used this tactic to evict public housing residents before, including at Barak Beacon, where residents fought the government to remain in their homes but eventually were dragged through VCAT and evicted; and recognises that Labor is treating public housing residents in these high-rise estates with contempt and that this treatment has left many residents feeling deeply distressed about their future. Four, it notes with concern residents' reports that they have felt pressured and coerced to accept the limited alternative housing options provided by Homes Victoria, leaving residents fearful that they will face homelessness if they do not accept the offer from the government. The motion calls for a moratorium on evictions of residents from these towers so residents cannot be forced to move out of their homes against their will.

Over the weekend we heard that the Labor government had signed this \$100 million contract with John Holland to demolish the first of the towers they plan to demolish right across Victoria, at Flemington and North Melbourne. What is particularly distressing about these contracts being signed is that the government has no plans for the redevelopment of the sites as yet. No contracts with the developer have been signed, no guarantee that any public housing will be rebuilt at these sites has been provided and no timeline for when people who are living there will be able to return has been provided to residents either. We know that Labor has signed these contracts with one purpose: to forcibly evict

residents using a legal pathway that will see people who do not want to leave their homes dragged through VCAT and lengthy legal proceedings. It happened to Margaret Kelly at the Barak Beacon estate last year, and we are about to see the mass eviction of public housing residents across these sites.

We are in the worst housing crisis that Victoria has experienced in decades: 120,000 people are on the waiting list for public housing here in Victoria, and 30,000 people are experiencing homelessness on any given night. Where are the hundreds of people that are being turfed out of their homes meant to go? Into the new homes that apparently are being built through the Big Housing Build that the Victorian Labor government likes to tout? But where are the people that those homes were meant to house going to go if these residents have to go into those homes? Labor is rearranging chairs on the deck of the *Titanic*. The ship is sinking, and they know it.

Before going any further I want to share the voices of residents directly into this debate. I would like to read a letter that was sent to the minister, with me copied in, a few weeks ago from 13 community groups within the Flemington and North Melbourne housing towers, representing hundreds of residents, including the Multicultural Sudanese Centre, the Eritrean community, the Somali community, the Jeberti community, the Somali women's group, Young Australian People, the North Melbourne Public Housing Residents Association, United Through Football and the Flemington women's group. The letter reads as follows:

Dear ... Minister ...

I write to you urgently on behalf of the Flemington and North Melbourne community, particularly those of us from African countries who have found refuge in Australia. The prospect of being displaced from our homes is causing profound distress and threatens to unravel the very core of our community.

The impact of relocation extends far beyond housing. These high-rise buildings are not just structures; they are the heart of our lives where we have forged friendships, built support networks, and cultivated a sense of belonging. Moving us from this community will sever these vital connections, leaving families isolated and vulnerable, especially our elderly who already struggle with language barriers and rely heavily on local community support.

While we acknowledge the necessity for building repairs or renewal, the proposed alternative of community housing on Victoria Street is wholly inadequate. These units do not meet our needs – they are cramped, lack space for our families and cultural practices, and fail to provide essential privacy and amenities.

Many families have inspected community housing properties at Victoria Street. Large families will need to sell and purchase new furniture to fit the space. We have been told to place our kitchen tables on the balcony, downsize to a smaller fridge, and sell our vehicles. Who is going to pay for all of this?

Some smaller families have considered relocating to community housing on Victoria Street but cannot afford to replace existing furniture.

Public housing, with its distinct policies and affordability, is essential for us as it provides stability and security that community housing cannot guarantee.

Furthermore, the scarcity of public housing exacerbates our concerns. With limited availability, we fear being scattered across areas where we lack necessary support networks and essential services. Where does Homes Victoria plan to relocate us and will there be sufficient parking, especially for women who rely on safe transportation options?

The impact on our cultural identity cannot be overstated. Many of us have fled war-torn countries seeking safety in Australia, and maintaining ties with our families overseas through visits is crucial for our emotional well-being. If we are relocated to community housing, the risk of losing Commonwealth rent assistance when visiting loved ones abroad would create an insurmountable barrier, further isolating us from our families and cultural heritage.

It is imperative that any relocation or demolition plans are immediately halted. The government must engage in meaningful consultation with our community to address these critical issues. We demand clarity on our rights – will we have the right to return to public housing? What will our rent be? These questions must be answered transparently and in writing to alleviate our anxieties.

The Flemington and North Melbourne communities have long supported each other, and any isolation or disconnection will lead to significant social issues impacting generations to come. Parents will lose vital support networks, and children will lose their school communities, which are safe havens for their growth and development.

We were initially assured that relocation would consider our needs and preferences, including moving with family and friends. However, recent interactions with relocation officers have contradicted these assurances, leaving us feeling coerced into accepting inadequate housing offers. The lack of consultation with our community during the planning of these community housing units has exacerbated this issue.

In conclusion, Homes Victoria and the government must take responsibility for rectifying this situation. Immediate action is needed to develop a comprehensive housing strategy that respects our cultural practices, provides adequate space, and ensures affordable housing options that preserve community cohesion and opportunities to stay connected to loved ones.

Time is critical. Please act swiftly and responsibly to address our concerns before irreparable damage is done to our community.

Sincerely ...

I thank those residents for voicing their concerns directly to the minister, and I hope the minister has the courtesy to respond directly back to them.

With every step of this process this government has chosen to ignore the voices of public housing residents. They have treated residents like a problem to be solved, and these demolition contracts are their latest response. With this motion we are calling for the government to guarantee they will not forcibly evict any resident at Flemington and North Melbourne at these high-rise towers earmarked for demolition, because that is the grim reality facing hundreds of residents right now. How in good conscience can a government be contemplating evicting public housing residents in the midst of this housing crisis? This housing plan, announced by then Premier Andrews in September last year, has been a disaster from the moment it was announced. It is predicated on demolitions and privatisations that could mean the end of public housing in Victoria, because Labor is retreating from public housing and instead wants to outsource public housing and privatise public land. This plan has always been about property developers making more profits. They were the ones standing around Premier Andrews when he announced this disastrous plan – not the housing experts and certainly not the residents. It was never about the residents, who are set to lose their homes, their communities and their security.

Labor has refused to release the documents or any justification for the decision to demolish the North Melbourne and Flemington towers. They fought against a parliamentary inquiry into the privatisation plan. They have obfuscated and gaslighted the community and us in this chamber at every single turn about what is going on, and they have just shelved another 15 public and community housing projects, instead handing public land to private developers that should be kept to build thousands more public homes. Recently at the Yoorrook Justice Commission, the government's own department revealed that land is the biggest prohibitive factor to creating more public and community housing, so you have to wonder about Labor's commitment to solve the housing crisis, when they would rather conduct a fire sale of public land than keep it in public hands for the public homes we know can end homelessness. With all these projects falling over and all the broken promises by the Allan Labor government, what confidence can Victorians have that these towers will not be razed to the ground and the land handed to private developers, who have no interest in rebuilding public or community housing if the government does not require and mandate it? The only promise that Premier Allan seems willing to keep is the promise to demolish thousands of public homes in the midst of a housing crisis.

I urge every member of this place to consider this motion carefully and deeply on behalf of the thousands of residents who are completely distressed, especially after hearing the government has just signed these contracts with no redevelopment plans afoot – with no guarantee that a single public home will be rebuilt at these sites. It is imperative we do everything that we can to give voice to these residents – the voices that the government is trying to diminish and minimise, who are vital to this process. We stand to see one of the biggest mass dislocation and disconnection programs of evictions that we have ever seen in Victoria. We stand on the precipice of communities being completely torn apart from each other, disappearing into the Victorian community, without any care from this government about what happens to their lives next. I implore every member of this Parliament to consider this motion deeply and carefully. If we pass this motion today it will send a very powerful

message to this Victorian Labor government that they do not have the permission of this place to evict public housing residents en masse.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (15:53): I rise to speak on Dr Ratnam's motion, which is calling for a moratorium on the provision of more social housing in this state. It is calling –

Samantha Ratnam: On a point of order, Acting President, the frame of the motion was misrepresented by the member. It is a moratorium on evictions, not a moratorium on social housing. I would bring it back to relevance to the motion before us.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): Continue, Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I am sorry that Dr Ratnam does not like listening to the truth. However, the consequences of this motion, which would impose a moratorium, would be to prevent the construction of new social housing in this state. That is exactly what Dr Ratnam is advocating for with this motion, and that is exactly the consequence of the course of action that she seeks this chamber to endorse. If she is unwilling to accept the consequences of her political campaign to stop more social housing being built in this state, I think she needs to take a good hard look at herself and the campaign of disinformation that her party is running in the community, because preventing more social housing – and more public housing – being built in this state is exactly the consequence of this motion.

Dr Ratnam said that this is the worst housing crisis in decades. That is why Labor wants to build more social housing in Victoria, and that is why it is outrageous and disgraceful that the Greens are trying to stand in the way of more social housing being built. But it is not the first time that the Greens have come into this place and campaigned against social housing being built. It is not the first time in this Parliament, let alone prior parliaments, that the Greens have been campaigning against social housing being built. I have not got time, because I have only got another 7½ minutes to go through all of the instances where the Greens have tried to prevent more social housing being built in Victoria. But we can talk about one of them, because Dr Ratnam mentioned it in her motion, and that is at Barak Beacon, where the old walk-up estates have been demolished and are being rebuilt with a 46 per cent increase in the amount of social housing being made available on land that remains in public hands. A 46 per cent increase at Barak Beacon in the amount of social housing being built on land that remains in public hands – that is what the Greens are opposed to. They are opposed to it in Port Melbourne, and they are opposed to it right around the other sites.

They talk a lot about, quite rightly, some of the distress that is being felt by people who have been subjected to a campaign of misinformation, disinformation and fear, which is designed to serve the political interests of Dr Ratnam and her party. But when we actually finish the construction of these new social houses, what we see, as we have seen in Bank Street in Prahran and as we have seen in New Street in Brighton – just to name two places in southern metropolitan Melbourne – is that we have residents moving back into new social housing that is energy efficient, is cheaper to live in and meets modern design and accessibility standards.

In constituency questions today Ms Copsey raised concerns about a resident who has accessibility issues. The design of her current accommodation as a public housing tenant, according to the information presented by Ms Copsey, means that she has difficulty with accessibility in her apartment. What Labor is trying to do is build new homes for people like that, who are residents in accommodation where the state is the landlord, converting their homes from places that are inaccessible, that are not meeting modern design standards and that are not being energy efficient to ones that are.

When we have visited these new developments, as I have done with Minister Shing, I have spoken to people like Deb, who just moved into the new accommodation at New Street in Brighton – a model the Greens oppose. Deb could not believe how great it was, that when she closed the doors to her balcony she could not hear the sounds from outside and that for the first time she was living in a place that was not draughty, had 7-star energy efficiency ratings, was accessible and was close to transport

and new community facilities. She thought it was fantastic, and that is the future that Labor wants for more public housing residents and more social housing residents right across Melbourne and right across Victoria.

Dr Ratnam, through this motion, wants us to stop the demolition of towers, including, it seems, two towers that have no-one living in them, because they are not fit for human habitation. They would prefer us to subject residents of the existing towers, who are in accommodation that was built 50 or 60 years ago using construction methods that make renovation and maintenance exceptionally challenging, to failing sewer stacks, as they currently are, and subject them to lifts that break down regularly because of the way that the retrofitting of sprinkler systems interferes with electrical circuitry in the lift wells, such that when sprinklers are triggered the lifts go out, often for days, because of the difficulty in maintaining them. That is the sort of accommodation that Dr Ratnam and the Greens think should be the gold standard for the most vulnerable in our community. They want to stop us fixing these problems, because even if we were not about to rebuild with modern energy efficiency and even if we went down the path that some advocate – including, as I have heard before, the Greens – of just renovating these places, we could not just go in and refurbish and renovate the concrete constructed towers that we have. If we were to do that in any program of refurbishment, as with evidence provided by the CEO of Homes Victoria to the Legal and Social Issues Committee of this Parliament in a public hearing last year – it is on the record; read the transcript. Mr Newport said that even if we were to renovate these properties, we would have to move everyone out, because you cannot drill through the concrete in a way that is safe for people who live next door. Even if you were to go down a path of just trying to renovate these properties, you would need to relocate the residents.

Samantha Ratnam interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Read the evidence provided to the Parliament before you start demanding more. That is what we have – basic physics and construction methodology means that drilling into concrete produces noise that is of unacceptable levels. If Dr Ratnam and the Greens think that forcing people to live through unacceptably noisy and dusty renovations is an acceptable way to behave as a landlord, they are mistaken.

There is a lot more that I could say, but I do not have time. Unfortunately, what we have seen on this week's episode of 'Wednesdays in Wills' is another episode in a campaign of misinformation and of disinformation. The lives of housing residents are being made much more difficult when they have politicians like the Greens seeking to exploit their fears for political gain, and they do it from the basis of misinformation and disinformation. This is not the first time they have done it. This is not the first experience that the community has had with the misinformation and disinformation that has been peddled by the Greens, and sadly, based on their track record, I expect it will not be the last.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (16:03): I rise to speak on Dr Ratnam's motion 521 in regard to public housing towers, particularly around the contracts that have been signed for demolition – a \$100 million contract with John Holland for the demolition of five public housing towers, including three in North Melbourne and Flemington. I recognise that Labor has signed demolition contracts without any plan for what happens next, or any guarantee that public housing will be rebuilt at each site, in order to forcibly evict residents from their homes using an illegal pathway.

I want to speak on this motion because I, like Dr Ratnam – at least for now for Dr Ratnam – represent the Northern Metropolitan Region, which captures a majority of the public housing towers in question. I, like Mr Welch, engage quite a bit with our multicultural communities, particularly our African and Somalian communities, who have all expressed concern to me about the government's plans, in particular the way they have gone about consultation for such a large change but also the way in which communication has not been very friendly or direct to CALD communities – communities that might struggle with English.

Let us go through the facts in regard to the contracts. We have had \$450 million allocated towards demolition but a \$100 million contract with John Holland, so where the other \$350 million is going is a good question and something that we have been keen to know. The demolition tender is set to see people forcibly removed. We heard a lot of stuff when this was announced about working with communities and making sure that they were all together, that family units would stay together and that there would be attempts to move them to similar locations. But now we hear of people being moved quite a long way out of town, quite a long way out from where their community is and quite a long way away from where their kids go to school, from where they meet for family barbecues and from where they meet for community gatherings. You can see how the consultation has evolved into a consultold and into a consultation wrecking ball with these demolitions. Where will the 600 forcibly removed families actually go? With no money and no plans to rebuild new towers, how long will families be displaced from their communities? Often they have come from being persecuted in different countries and come to Australia and set up a community and a family life here in the inner north. Now they are being told they have to leave the area, in some ways the only area that they have known, the area that they have found a community in and the area that they have found family in. The consultation has been subpar.

Without money, when will the replacement homes be available? We know that Homes Victoria has only added an extra 492 homes since the Big Housing Build. We know there are 2700 fewer bedrooms despite the billions of dollars spent. Also, I found it quite interesting that the contracts were with John Holland because we know recently that competition experts have actually belled the cat and urged the ACCC to investigate John Holland and the CFMEU limiting the amount that labour hire firms can be used on sites, which distorts competition and causes a huge blowout in regard to taxpayer funds. We need competition to ensure we have efficiency and to ensure we keep costs down, and we are seeing big union bosses and big business consorting together to screw over the taxpayer in state after state. It is not something we want to see; it is something that I will certainly be keeping my eyes on in representing my constituents. I want to thank Dr Ratnam for bringing her motion up to the Legislative Council, and the Liberals and Nationals will be supporting the motion.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:09): I rise today to speak on the motion which has been put forward by Dr Ratnam. We have already ventilated this issue many, many times in this place. It is an important issue and it is an important thing that we should be talking about. What we are actually talking about is a very significant investment in the future of Victoria's social housing. I have gone through all these arguments many times before, and I am sure I will go through them today and it will make absolutely no difference, because the Greens are hell-bent on using this as a campaign, hell-bent on frightening and intimidating people and spreading all sorts of disinformation when it comes to what we are doing.

In fact it is quite hard to unpack from all the very many corners why this is such a disgraceful motion. Once again it is grandstanding and politicking at the expense of the very people they are purporting to represent. I am drawn once again to discuss the Legal and Social Issues Committee, where I, amongst and with other members in this place, extensively heard from various stakeholders when it came to rental and housing more broadly, but particularly we heard from Homes Victoria. We heard directly about the absolutely squalid conditions that so many people are living in. We heard about the fact that for these current buildings – these ones that the Greens are so desperately trying to save – for every vacancy that comes up they have to go to 10 people before they can actually get someone to accept it, either because people understandably do not want to live in these conditions or they physically cannot, if they are disabled or if they have special requirements. These buildings are not fit for purpose. They are, quite frankly, not habitable, and yet here we have the Greens political party trying to actually say to people who are doing it tough, who are in social or public housing, 'You do not deserve the same standard of housing that everyone else in Victoria gets.' That is, frankly, disgraceful. It is an absolute disgrace to come into this place and say that you are representing them when all you are doing is seeking to confine them in these conditions, which are clearly unacceptable and should be unacceptable to all of us.

We have seen take-up rates of these sorts of projects in huge numbers. We have seen 97 per cent of the residents actually taking up these offers. Change is difficult, and I know that, and it absolutely should not be some blasé ‘come in’ and ‘out you go’ sort of situation. It absolutely should be done with tactfulness, with dignity and with respect. I know that Minister Shing is very invested in that as well, and I know that is what a lot of people are reporting back – that that is how they have been treated. There are always going to be some who will still not wish to move. I do understand and I do respect that. But I think it is important to note that what we have here today is the Greens actually saying to the 97 per cent of people who actually do want to better their lives, who actually do want to live in better quality and better condition of housing, ‘You don’t get to’ – because what is in this motion? The word ‘moratorium.’ The Greens want a moratorium on us building the safe, secure and habitable social housing that Victorians deserve. No Victorian deserves to be treated any less than being able to live in a habitable home, but that is exactly what this motion will seek to achieve.

We have heard – and I am sure we will continue to hear from them today – the Greens saying words along the lines of, ‘Well, just retrofit them. Just fix them. Just make them better.’ We could try and do that. It, frankly, would not be very successful. You could spend a lot of money to get a lot of relative improvements, but you would still have some of the functional, core issues – you cannot make floors higher and you cannot do all the other sorts of things. In some cases we also heard examples like the sewer systems overflowing and other very functional issues, very core, structural issues in these buildings, that are causing a lot of these habitability issues. You cannot fix them all. But even if you did do that and you threw all the money in the world at fixing them, what would you have to do? You would have to relocate these people out of those towers in order to do that. It is simply not possible to do so. For the Greens to say otherwise is, frankly, disingenuous; it is outrageous. Ninety-seven per cent of the people have accepted these relocations. We know that they are all guaranteed the opportunity to move back to the new towers once they are built.

I do not for one second underestimate the value of community, of location, of amenity. They are so important to people, especially when they are doing it tough. I note from the tower projects that are already underway that those relocations are actually very close by. In fact some of them, I believe, are across the road. And from what I hear from the early reports, the majority of those who did move to those nearby locations say, ‘No, I’m actually very happy here.’ But everyone has the right to move back to that original site when that tower is rebuilt, when we have the new, modern, up-to-standard, habitable housing – again, the habitable housing that all Victorians deserve. To say that the people in social housing do not deserve to live in habitable housing is disgraceful, and that is the implicit conclusion that you must draw from support of this motion. Because a moratorium on these projects, a moratorium on making these changes, which will of course provide additional housing – we know that there will be a minimum 10 per cent uplift in social housing as a result of these projects – is to say that those people are not important, that the needs of people who for whatever reason are not able to move into these towers as they are – again, 10 offers for every property before one can be taken – are not important, and that is disgraceful.

The way in which this campaign by the Greens has been run is extremely disappointing. I again refer to a speech I gave some time ago in this place in response to a Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry report into rental and housing affordability. I said that growing up I had always, one, explored and, for want of a better word, experimented with different political parties and views. I had always had the sense that whatever the Greens did and whatever actions they might take in here they had always come from a logical point of view. This issue has entirely disproven that to me, because they are not acting in the best interests of people in social housing in Victoria by saying these things, by saying all these things and giving them false hope that these buildings can be magically fixed. They cannot. I genuinely would be curious to know how you do that. How do you make buildings like this fully habitable without requiring people to be relocated? It is just not possible, so for you to be saying this you are basically saying that you support people living in these conditions just because they live in social housing. That is not acceptable to me. It is not acceptable to Minister Shing. I see Ms Terpstra in the room – it is not acceptable to her either. It is not acceptable to the Labor government, because

we believe that everyone should have a fair go and equality of opportunity. You do not get a fair go or equality of opportunity if you are starting out in decrepit conditions.

There are a lot of good things about the communities and the cultures of these places, of these towers, and that is a special thing, and it is something that needs to be kept in consideration. I believe it has been kept in consideration, but we do not get anywhere by letting these places become more and more uninhabitable with less and less people being prepared to or even being able to live in them. We do not create strong communities that way. We do not address the housing crisis that way.

We have strong clear plans for building more housing in Victoria, more social housing in Victoria, that responds to the needs of the community. It is indeed a good thing that we have wonderful community-driven organisations, these wonderful local not-for-profits doing that. It is disgraceful, again, to hear these amazing groups doing good work in providing housing to local communities, in many cases to their specific cultural communities, being dismissed as private or a privatisation of social housing. Nothing could be further from the truth. I really hope to one day again be able to say that the Greens, despite all their other faults, at least stand for logic. Right now I cannot say that.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:19): I stand to speak on motion 521, raised by Dr Ratnam. My contribution will just cover a couple of things. One thing we learned through the 1970s and 80s was that putting families and communities into tower blocks actually led to very bad social outcomes generally, and we learned through the 1980s that we should stop doing that and we should start moving into better, more sustainable housing for those who are in need and vulnerable. The only thing that is worse than putting working-class and vulnerable communities into tower blocks, it turns out, is when you go into a working-class area and tear that community apart and disperse them to the winds.

There are some very vivid examples of that. I know of the ones from London in particular, where they went through working-class areas and they said, 'Well, the great virtue for you is you're going to have indoor toilets. So we're going to demolish your whole suburb, and we'll put you in tower blocks, and how wonderful it will be.' What we found of course was whole communities were destroyed – the culture and the connections. The kids moved to different schools. People had to go to different sports clubs. All of the customs and the things that made a successful community were destroyed in a vulnerable community. I think we see the same here to some extent in that this community is not going to be moved, it is going to be dispersed to the wind. Certainly I would love to know how many kids are going to new schools as a consequence of this. I would love to know how many kids who are participating and integrating successfully in sports clubs and community groups and Scout groups are now dispersed to the wind and now have to re-establish without the connections that they had. We have gone from a bad, and we are going to a worse.

The bit I just cannot get my head around is this: if we have not already built the alternative accommodation, why are we decanting them in this way? I hear the word 'misinformation' and 'You're going to stop all housing going on' – well, we are talking about this particular site, aren't we? We are not talking about the whole of Victoria, so it is a very disingenuous line of reasoning. Do not decant these people until you have got somewhere for them to go. Continue with all the other building, please – in fact hurry that up. That would be a good idea. No-one is against improving the quality of stock of social housing – no-one. It is a good thing. Let us do it. How about you have those things ready before you start knocking down the ones you have already got when you are in the middle of a housing crisis. It is common sense.

It is interesting – they talked about consultation. There is form on this. It is not just there. The people of Box Hill were consulted about the Suburban Rail Loop, and they said, 'Maybe you'd have 20-storey buildings coming to your area,' but lo and behold that turned into 40-storey buildings, and then very shortly later – only a couple of months ago – it is now 50-storey buildings. That was the consultation then. I can well imagine with a vulnerable community in North Melbourne that they used the same

practice, the same techniques to drip-feed information – drip, drip, drip. ‘It’s these conditions,’ and suddenly they are in a place they do not want to be.

I do not know if there was misinformation, because they did not articulate it. They just kept saying the word ‘misinformation’. They did not articulate anything. I do not know if there was any misinformation, because you did not actually lay any out other than you have signed a contract in order that you can now legally evict the people who do not want to go. You are telling me the conditions are squalid, yet they do not want to go. When I met with the Somalian community, they did not want to go en masse. In fact to the extent they do not want to go, they will not invite anyone from Labor to any of their events because they are so angry about it, and I can understand that fully. Not even the councillors get a gig anymore up that way. If they are living in supposedly squalor, I have got two questions: how come they do not want to move, and if it is squalor, how come you have allowed it over the last 10 years?

Michael Galea: Ninety-seven per cent do. Did you not understand that? Ninety-seven per cent do. Why do you want to stop them from being able to better their lives?

Richard WELCH: How come you have allowed people to live in squalor if that is your view?

Michael Galea: Why are you so desperate to support a Greens motion?

Richard WELCH: I am not. I am very –

Michael Galea: What sort of deal have you done?

Richard WELCH: If there is misinformation, why did you not explain what it was? Anyone standing here objectively cannot make sense of what you are saying, because there are people in housing now that you are going to disperse to the winds. You are going to knock down a building before you have got any other buildings to put them into. It does not make sense. Let us call it the pub test – it does not cover it. If you talk to anyone in the street, it does not make sense. In the meantime you have not actually added any residences. You have not added any bedrooms.

What this reflects of course is the haphazard, chaotic manner in which this government manages any project of scale. With any project of scale, they are chaotic and incompetent. It defies comprehension to me as, let us say, a relatively new member. You look behind the curtain of politics and you wonder why people scratch their heads at what this government does. Well, here it is writ large: ‘Let’s move them out, but we haven’t got anywhere for them to go and we are in the middle of a housing crisis.’ It is insane. We are signing contracts and committing people. I will leave my contribution there in somewhat of an air of confusion –

Samantha Ratnam: Bewilderment.

Richard WELCH: Bewilderment, but perhaps not surprise.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Thank you, Mr Welch. Just before we start, contributions are meant to go through the Chair. There was a three-way yelling match going there, which is not how it is meant to work. If you wish to interject, that is fine. But let us just try and do it in as orderly a manner as we can.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:26): I rise to speak on the motion in Dr Ratnam’s name about the redevelopment of the public housing towers. There are a number of central themes that are contained in this motion, and obviously part of it is the demolition of five public housing towers, including three in North Melbourne and Flemington. It is about residents and what is going to happen to them as a consequence of the demolition but also the redevelopment and rebuilding of those public housing towers. It acknowledges that contracts have been signed without residents receiving any commitment from the government. I am going to address some of these points, and I have had the benefit of listening to what Mr Welch said over there as well. Obviously I hope you listen to the contribution, because what you just said bewilders me. If you were listening to anything that

anyone said here – through you, Acting President – you would understand that there are answers to the questions that have been put on record by other speakers. Then there is a bunch of rubbish here about what Labor is alleged to have done, so I am going to provide some facts on the record for this as well.

What I find particularly distasteful about this motion is that there are people at the heart of this motion who are being provided housing by the state Labor government. This is something that Labor governments do. We have for many, many years – for decades in fact – provided public housing for people who are in need. I find it particularly distasteful and disingenuous that the Greens continue to peddle misinformation and disinformation about their options. I am going to go directly to that and provide some clear answers to rebut many of the things that are contained in this motion. It is a pretty sad state of affairs when you see a political party, like the Greens, using vulnerable people just to peddle their own twisted agenda about what they allege and peddle as disinformation around public, social and affordable housing.

Let us go to the facts. Melbourne's high-rise public housing towers are nearing the end of their useful life and are no longer providing a standard of living renters deserve. Any tenant in a public housing facility deserves a good standard of living, the same standard that anyone in this chamber or outside, who might walk down Spring Street, is entitled to. That includes heating and cooling. That includes buildings that are fit for purpose, that retain heat and that repel heat when it is hot – appropriate standards of living. I might say that Minister Shing and I visited some brand new housing that we delivered in Croydon – 137 public housing units, I believe – and they are fantastic. The residents there are very happy. But they are new; they are not old. They have not reached the end of their life. How do we know that these towers have reached the end of their life? Because engineers have told us that – experts, people who are actually qualified and know what they are talking about. We listened to the experts and we said, 'Okay, these towers have reached the end of their useful life.' The towers provided safe homes for renters for more than 50 years, but in recent years building faults and breakdowns have become more common, causing frequent disruptions to residents' comfort and safety.

When you rent a place, you are entitled to quiet enjoyment. But if things keep breaking down and are in disrepair and it becomes clear to the owners of that place that it is going to cost more, then you might have to take stronger action around the longevity of that property. This is what has happened in the case of these towers. They are 50 years old, so they fail against modern standards for noise, sustainability, energy efficiency, ventilation, private open space, seismic standards, accessibility and minimum amenity. If we listen to the disinformation that is contained in Dr Ratnam's motion, are we meant to just keep those people in that standard of living and in accommodation that is clearly not fit for modern standards? That is what this motion wants us to do – to keep people in substandard accommodation. That is not what the Labor government is about. We want to make sure that people in our public housing facilities have the best and most appropriate standards of living that we can offer them and that any other person should be entitled to enjoy.

The underlying construction of these buildings also prevents significant modifications and the ability to move walls, doorways and corridors because, guess what, they are made out of concrete – a bit of a problem. They cannot meet modern disability and accessibility standards. Just as an example, I have been to places that have very narrow corridors because in the 1970s people did not think about modern disability standards. Now corridors are required to be wider to take wheelchairs. The towers do not meet those standards. They were built between 1958 and 1975; they were constructed using a unique panel-construction method that is different to conventional high-rise construction. Whilst it was very innovative at the time, the method prevents major alterations, as I said, required to meet modern expectations. Independent advice from structural engineers and from asset and facilities management consultants estimated it would cost \$2.3 billion over 20 years just to keep the towers in a habitable condition. That did not make sense. We cannot win here on this side of the chamber, because if we did that, we would be wasting money, and if we are doing this, we are still wasting money. The hypocrisy and the disingenuousness about the debate around this motion is really, really clear.

It was only a couple of months ago that an engineering team was engaged to inspect a sewer leak at the property on the 15th floor of Park Towers. Three tenancies – seven people in total – were required to relocate as a result of the emerging issue. That is a pretty significant disruption to your life, a sewer problem. No-one wants that. We had to relocate people to get that fixed.

We are committed to providing homes for people that are modern, comfortable, private, energy efficient and well located. The redevelopment of the 44 public high-rise towers will benefit Victorians for decades to come and will increase social housing across the sites by at least 10 per cent. Again, this is more disinformation from those down there on the Greens benches, and the Libs just want to kick us as well; it suits you right now because you are doing deals with them.

Let us quickly, in the 3 minutes that I have left, talk about the relocation process. Minister Shing reiterated this this week when a question was asked in this chamber about relocation, in question time. Homes Victoria has had individual meetings with 98 per cent of the 484 households that were residing at the North Melbourne and Flemington towers. As of 9 August 2024, 96 per cent of all households have submitted a housing application to outline their housing needs, with 70 per cent expressing a preference to remain within their community and in the immediate area. It is quite a different story that is being peddled in the disinformation that is contained in the motion. Using vulnerable people to politically pointscore is a disgraceful act, because what we know and the work that the department has done tells a very different story.

A member interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: It is incorrect. As of 3 August 2024, 124 households have moved and a further 106 households are either matched to an alternative property or have accepted a property that meets their household eligibility and need requirements. Eighty-eight households have relocated to new homes in the immediate area – so to your point, no-one has been disrupted around sporting clubs and schools – at Victoria Street, Flemington, managed by Community Housing Limited. That organisation has done a power of work to make sure that these people's needs are met. I only have a minute and a half left, but it is pretty important that I get these things on the record because it is very disappointing again to see the Greens and the Liberals opposite using vulnerable people to politically pointscore. The Allan Labor government understands and will take as much care as we can to make sure that these people get housing that is appropriate for their needs and that their needs are met and catered for.

Relocation appointments usually take between 30 minutes and 1 hour, and we make sure we go through a long process to ensure that their needs are met. Renters can seek support from friends and family or a representative of the Victorian Public Tenants Association or Tenants Victoria, a community legal organisation. They can have further assistance at those meetings if they wish, at their insistence. We have no problem with that. It is quite a different story to what is being told opposite and on the Greens benches. The Homes Victoria relocation team will offer renters an interpreter when they book the appointment as well, so again, outrageous disinformation being peddled by the Greens. Cohealth are also working alongside the department's relocation support team to ensure renters have access to the support they need. The assigned relocation team member will talk with household members to understand their housing and support needs, as the information is used to complete a relocation application form. We take as much care as is needed and is absolutely possible.

There is so much more that I could say about this, but again, it is very disappointing to hear the Greens peddling disinformation and continuing to use vulnerable Victorians in this way as a political football. This motion should be rejected.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:36): I will start my contribution on the motion put forward by Dr Ratnam by opposing it as a disingenuous and opportunistic motion. For me, I am really frustrated, as somebody who knows these residents, that this motion is before us. I know that some things are definitely shaping this motion, including aspirations for office in another place in another state. I need to start by saying that Minister Shing is here, and I am glad she is when I say that she is

doing a really outstanding job as Minister for Housing. This has been demonstrated in so many ways, including an extension of public and private invitations to Dr Ratnam and any members of this place for a briefing on the issues that have been raised. Those invitations have been discussed in question time time and time again. I would be happy to go to *Hansard* and find them, because I know that those invitations have been declined.

Perhaps it is best that I speak to some facts. The fact is that the high-rise public housing towers that we are speaking of in the motion have provided safe homes for residents for more than 50 years. These buildings were constructed between 1958 and 1975 using the best innovations of the time and techniques that delivered what renters needed at the time. But these buildings are no longer fit for purpose. Since their construction the needs and expectations of renters have changed, and the buildings frankly are just not keeping pace. They do not meet contemporary standards for noise, for energy efficiency, for accessibility or for private space availability. There are building faults and breakdowns. They have become more common, I know because I get the calls, and they are really a growing concern for residents' safety. The design of the buildings also prevents modifications such as moving doors, walls and corridors to meet modern accessibility requirements. There are so many examples that come to mind. I am thinking about families, I am thinking about people that while staying there have acquired a disability and find that living there is incredibly challenging. I know that the team at Homes Victoria work really hard to find new homes where required, but the truth is that those towers have seen better days.

I will give you a really specific example. Troy at Park Towers spoke to me about the sewers and he spoke to me about the community rooms. He has spoken to me about public space, he has spoken to me about safety. There are so many headaches for renters because of really outdated building design. The team have been in there, whether they are experts or engineers and all sorts, looking into what started as a simple issue but has grown in complexity. It has required tenants to move – three tenants required relocation. There were a number of apartments that were affected by leaks and corrosion in the sewer stack, and a further eight apartments in the same area needed preventative work to avoid the problem spreading further.

Just to be really clear, I understand that folks think that there is some sort of magic pill that we can take and we can retrofit them and that can happen overnight with the flick of a switch, and the truth is that that just cannot be done. Incidents like that at Park Towers are not isolated. They are happening right across our towers, including to folks in Northern Metropolitan Region. I know that they love their homes. I know when they speak to me that they love their communities and what they have created there. But it is becoming increasingly clear to them that their towers are just not up to scratch. What they see around them is new places being built, new places that are energy efficient, new places that are accessible, new places that have open space, new places that meet 7-star energy efficiency standards. What they see going up around them are places where they too want to live. That is why they are telling me that they deserve better and that they want it. That is what we are delivering with our housing renewal program. I know that advice from independent structural engineers says that it will cost over \$2 billion over the next 20 years to keep these towers in a basic, habitable condition, and frankly these renters deserve better. Neither renters nor the government think it is good enough, and I am with them.

The Allan Labor government is committed to providing high-standard homes that are modern. They are comfortable, they are private, they are energy efficient, they are well located and they are suitable for families. Our plan to develop 44 public high-rise towers will benefit Victorians for many decades to come and increase social housing across the sites by at least 10 per cent. The fact of the matter is that we cannot deliver these huge improvements while people still live there. Anyone who has ever lived next to a construction site can only imagine how challenging it would be living next to a high-rise construction site. My goodness. It is not practical, it is not safe and it is not going to be quick either, let me be frank. We would not expect people in private rentals to continue living onsite while the landlord carries out massive renovations. I just do not understand why we would expect people in

public housing to be subject to these conditions. They deserve what I said before: energy efficient private modern homes. I just do not think that I could ever agree with a two-tier system where residents must risk their safety but private renters do not. I just do not agree with it. So we need some residents to relocate. It is as simple as that.

Firstly, let us be very clear: residents relocating from the towers first and foremost have the right to return to the estate they initially moved from when it is rebuilt. Many have let us know that, and if there is a unit available which meets their accessibility and accommodation requirements, residents of the old building will be allocated a home in the new building. This is a guarantee which has been communicated to residents time and time again. I know because I myself have delivered those messages. I could not be clearer on the doors, and I know that Homes Victoria are the same. We also, when it comes to this motion, are completely committed to embracing a residents- and community-first model, developing a deep understanding of each and every renter's housing and social support needs and their connections to the local community. I am very clear about the fact that Homes Victoria are doing everything they can. Individual meetings have been held with 98 per cent of the 484 households in North Melbourne and Flemington towers. As of 9 August, 96 per cent of those households have made submissions about their housing needs and 70 per cent of those have indicated their desire to remain in the local community. As of 3 August, 124 of those households have moved from those complexes and a further 106 were either matched to another property or have accepted a property that meets their requirements. I think that is wonderful news, and 88 households have actually relocated to houses in the immediate vicinity at Victoria Street, Flemington.

We are collaborating with residents. We are not coercing them, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach that this motion seems to wish we had. This is why I am particularly disappointed that our approach has been described as contemptuous. You see, every time a resident relocates, they are scheduled an appointment with support services who explain the relocation process. They explain their rights. They can be accompanied by family and friends, a representative from the Victorian Public Tenants Association or Tenants Victoria or a legal representative, and they also have access to an interpreter. These relocation officers are out and about. They know these communities and are very much driven by what is best for them and their families.

I know that this will come up time and time again, and so with the time that I have left can I continue to thank Harriet Shing for her incredible leadership on this.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (16:46): I too rise to oppose this Greens motion on the public housing towers. We have heard a lot of contributions. There are a number of points I would like to pick up on, and I will do so as I go through my notes. We know that the housing towers in Melbourne are reaching the end of their useful life. I have got some other notes detailing that, which I want to pick up as I go. I think we want to see renters living in homes. We want to see our public housing tenants, our social housing tenants – anybody, including people who buy a home, people that own a home – living somewhere where they are comfortable, where there is energy efficiency that results in them having cheaper power bills, where there are not draughts coming through resulting in them having more expensive power bills or lesser health outcomes, where it is soundproof, where they can get a good night's sleep and where they can find relaxation and comfort. We know that these towers have provided homes to people for 50-plus years, but it is increasingly difficult to keep these buildings going with bolts and breakdowns. This becomes more common, which becomes a safety issue. We should not have safety becoming an issue due to ageing towers, so the desire to delay, stop or put a moratorium on the important work of getting on and building new housing is simply inappropriate, and potentially I could use stronger language than that.

The current buildings – I have already mentioned noise, energy, ventilation, open space, seismic standards, accessibility and minimum amenity. Mr Batchelor commented on accessibility, and those accessibility standards are something that particularly people on this side have fought very hard for over a long period of time. We should be getting on with delivering new buildings that deliver all the things I have just outlined and ensuring that tenants can be in these buildings.

We have already talked about construction today. Construction is a difficult place to work in, let alone live in – the dust, the noise, the dangers that come with it. We have heard today how it is one of the most dangerous sectors to work in in our state, so to be living in, near or around construction is not something that we should be pushing on anybody, and we certainly should not be pushing it from a place of political motivation. I think over the years various people who align themselves with the Greens have fought for good things, but we have also seen over the years various people in the Greens take a political tack on certain issues that they simply should not because they are too important to be used as political footballs. This issue is one of those – it is absolutely one of those. I mentioned before the age of the towers, the time they were designed and the time they were constructed. They are not fit for today. Independent advice from structural engineers and from an asset and facilities management consultant estimated it would cost \$2.3 billion over 20 years just to keep the towers in a habitable condition.

I also just want to briefly turn to the Legal and Social Issues Committee report that came out last November and just touch on some of the words briefly from Homes Victoria CEO Simon Newport, who said:

The ... towers are prone to a number of issues, certainly inadequate elevators in terms of just not enough realistically for people to use. They have been retrofitted with sprinkler systems. Obviously when they were first designed they did not have sprinkler systems – fire suppression systems. They have been put in, but the nature of the building is that the elevator shafts sit below ground level so whenever a sprinkler system is tripped the elevator pit fills with water, short-circuits the control board and then the elevators are out of action for some time – 24 to 48 hours ...

The reason why we talk about new construction being able to be constructed from the ground up fit for purpose is exactly so we can meet our current-day standards and so we are not trying to retrofit something in – something that is people's homes. We are not talking about business premises that might be used for a certain amount of hours of the day and being able to manoeuvre around their use; these are people's homes. I absolutely stand here in opposition to this motion, and I support the work of the government. I will leave my comments there.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:52): I rise to contribute some comments to the motion before us today moved by my colleague Dr Ratnam, noting a range of points, but primarily the focus is a moratorium on forced evictions of residents in the listed sites, as evident in the motion itself. It has been quite bizarre to listen to several government members from the Labor Party twisting and contorting themselves into knots to try and explain this disastrous proposal that has been put before the Victorian people under the former Premier Daniel Andrews. What we are looking at, as prefaced by my colleague and as many in the community have noted, is destruction – wholesale – of public housing as we know it in this state.

I have heard scant commentary using the term 'public housing' in this debate. I have heard lots about social housing, which as noted by this government is a part of the continuum – a very important part of the continuum. But public homes are an important thing for everyone. They are a public good and a public service to be maintained by government. It feels like a bit of a pattern that we have seen, where something that is to be maintained and operated by, and is accountable through, government – public housing, a public good, a public service – is allowed to fall into disrepair. All of the things that have been noted by government members and all of the issues, structurally or otherwise, with these sites are things to be maintained and serviced by a government respecting the wishes and needs of constituents. What happens is instead we see these things are left – neglected – to fall into disrepair and are then used in an argument to privatise and destroy these sites. It has been, again, quite bizarre, the level of focus that the government – Labor members – have attempted, to indicate as if what is being proposed is solely in service of the residents of these sites when my colleague has personally read out the words of residents from these towers to this place, and those have been entirely disregarded by the government members.

The thought that those have been spun – the only people spinning words of residents in this place are the members of this Labor government. The residents themselves are the ones who are coming to us and coming to many people within this chamber, saying they have no intention of leaving homes that they have lived in for many years. They are saying that absolutely clearly. The idea that people are begging to leave their homes – I might put a view to this chamber, for example. If it were truly the view of this Labor government that the residents of these towers were their focus, that that was a priority in this conversation, then why have we not seen new homes being built in places that people want to live and that people are then offered the chance to move into at these sites, that people could choose if they wanted to? Instead, in point (4) of this motion we have noted with concern residents' reports – reports from the residents themselves – that they have felt pressured and coerced into accepting the limited alternative housing options provided by Homes Victoria, leaving residents fearful that they will face homelessness if they do not accept the offer from this Labor government.

We heard earlier commentary from multiple members about comments from the CEO of Homes Victoria through the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into housing in the previous calendar year. As someone on that committee, I might speak a bit further to the comments that the CEO made. The CEO referred to the idea of renovating and retrofitting the tower sites as 'putting lipstick on a pig'. It was absolutely disgusting, such a comment being made about the homes of people who live in these towers – their homes for years. Lipstick on a pig? Is that the level of disdain with which people within this government, within government departments, would view people who live in public housing? Honestly, the moment that it was said my stomach just sank. It was one of the most disgraceful things that I have heard from any public servant in the period that I have been serving within this Parliament.

There are examples within my own electorate. I have noted multiple times within this place where a pitch had been put by this government – 'We'll knock down existing public housing on this site. We will, under the ground lease model,' or whichever model, 'build new homes for people to live in.' There was an instance I raised not that long ago in this place where that site will sit vacant for 10 years, with nothing built on that site. As it currently stands, when is the shovel hitting the ground? It might be completed by 2027, after the next election. For 10 years the site will be sitting vacant when it was originally dreamed of as a policy for new homes to be offered to people who need them. It is honestly disgraceful. Time and time again I raise instances within this place about how many social homes, how many public homes, are to be built on sites that have been demolished – or 'redeveloped' as the government calls it. Yet time and time again what we will see prioritised is private housing at market price for people who need alternate options.

One side comment I will also make is with regard to interpreting. I have met with a series of interpreters and people working in that space quite recently, and they have raised with me, across a variety of government departments, concern about the level of service that is offered and the quality of services that are provided to people who need those services. The idea that those provisions that are being given to public housing residents are adequate for them to be able to actively advocate on their own behalf in these conversations – collaborations, as it has been put – I do view with a degree of scepticism. It is important that this is actually a genuine offer for people to move into a home that is fit for their needs as opposed to people being physically coerced out of the homes that they are living in. That is an absolutely disgraceful thought, and we have heard time and time again where that has occurred.

I will leave my commentary with this. Time and time again Labor members come before this place with respect to this issue of public housing – again, barely mentioned by them; it is more social values instead – and they will say 'disinformation', 'misinformation'. It is as if you could say the words infinite times and make them true. Yet time and time again we do not see the documents – we do not see the evidence that this is the case. It is as if you can say it and say it and say it and the community will one day believe it. The community sees differently. Shame on this Labor government.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (16:59): What we have today is a motion that is being put ostensibly to require people in some of the most vulnerable parts of our community, whether that relates to access to information, to

an asymmetry around financial means or to a number of the barriers and challenges that are attendant in life where there are often complex decision-making processes, to be called upon not to be able to leave their accommodation – their homes – which they know and which they tell us are no longer where they want to be. This motion is saying that, because a moratorium is called, people cannot be moved, whether that is for the purpose of retrofitting or reinforcing or improving buildings to a habitable status or in fact for the purpose of a redevelopment. What we are therefore left with is a motion that says that renters will have, should this motion succeed, no opportunity to be able to relocate from housing which is not fit for purpose nor an opportunity to be able to leave and then return to a retrofitted upgraded tower, which in fact does not actually create a serviceable wonderful place to live in comparison to the sorts of places which our colleagues on the Greens bench call home. But we are saying through this motion and the debate here in the Parliament today that people should not be able to leave, that they should not be able to leave unless everybody says that in fact the development and the repurposing and the enhancement of social housing across the state is accepted by everyone. That is to my mind writ large the most perfect example of the Greens ethos of the perfect being the enemy of the good.

We have here the vast majority of residents across these locations having conversations about what they want, where they want to live, how they want to live, the sorts of aspirations and ambitions that they have for themselves and their families actually being ignored by the Greens for the purpose of a narrative that – and we know from what they have stood up and said today – actually does not have anything to do with people. It is about their very niche conversation on the status of social housing. They ignore – unless it is for a photo opportunity out the front during Homelessness Week when they are all too happy to pose with them – the work of the community housing sector.

Community housing takes people off the waitlist. Community housing is funded by the government. It is for-purpose organisations, Aboriginal-controlled housing organisations, women's housing, the work of multicultural and multifaith organisations that is being able to provide support to people who need it most. There is so much work going on every single day to help people to have access to information which is accurate and which is consistent. The great tragedy in this is that we do not have an opportunity to talk collectively and in a united fashion as a Parliament about the importance of people's right to housing which meets their needs. We can trade quotes all we want. To that end, I note the concern and the confusion about the relocations process and all that we are doing to try to assist people around what that means.

People will have a right to return. That is ingrained in the work that we are doing. People will have a careful engagement around how their circumstances change and what they might want to do over time. In addition to that, misinformation should be seen for what it is – something which causes very real damage. And where Dr Ratnam got to her feet and read a letter at the outset, I want to conclude this debate here today by reading from a report of AusAfric Foundation Australia addressing misrepresentation of the Flemington community. It says, amongst other things:

Recent reports have surfaced suggesting that the Flemington community is resistant to relocation and content with the current living conditions. These reports are not only false but also detrimental to the community's efforts to improve living standards and safety.

...

Contrary to the false reports, the majority of the Flemington community recognizes the need for better living conditions. Overcrowding, lack of safety, and substandard housing have been persistent issues affecting residents' quality of life.

...

The introduction of new community housing offers promising solutions to address these challenges ...

...

MOTIONS

2808

Legislative Council

Wednesday 14 August 2024

It is crucial to dispel misconceptions surrounding the affordability and security of new community housing. Contrary to claims of being expensive and less secure ... these housing options provide affordable alternatives with enhanced security measures.

...

The misrepresentation of the Flemington community's stance on relocation appears to be politically motivated, with the *Green Party* attempting to gain support by spreading false information.

(Time expired)

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (17:06): I thank everyone who has contributed to this very important debate today. There are a number of points, I think, that need to be clarified, which were quite intentionally distorted through this debate. Let us talk about the most basic premise of the motion before us. Firstly, this motion is about calling for a moratorium on forced evictions of residents against their will. We are not talking about relocations, we are talking about evictions, because this government has done. They have evicted public housing residents before, and we know they can evict public housing residents again, because they hold public housing residents in contempt.

Sheena Watt: On a point of order, Acting President, I just walked in and there was quite a lot of loud noise in the chamber. I would not mind hearing the remarks from Dr Ratnam, because I am sure that I will have some points of order as we continue to hear her representations on the motion before us.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Thank you, Ms Watt. Dr Ratnam to continue.

Samantha RATNAM: Just to restate for the record, this motion is quite specifically asking for a moratorium on evictions – forced evictions, forced removal of people from their homes. We are not talking about relocations, we are talking about evictions, because this government has evicted public housing residents before and they are capable of doing it again. We know that ever since former Premier Andrews announced this plan it has been met with so much concern from the community, and the gravest concern has come from residents themselves. We know those concerns have come from those residents themselves because we have talked to those residents directly. Countless numbers of residents have looked us in the eye and told us with desperation that they wanted us to fight for them. That is what we are doing here today: we are fighting for every resident who wants to stay in their home, who does not want their communities torn apart and who wants to remain living in public housing.

Labor has made claims of disinformation and misinformation. A lot of mental gymnastics have occurred today in this debate, but no alternative information has been provided to somehow provide credibility to their claims of disinformation. I think they believe that if they just say 'disinformation' enough, people will believe that there is some disinformation. If you are actually going to make a claim of disinformation, let us actually talk about the accurate information.

For nearly 10 years this Labor government has embarked upon a privatisation program of public housing estates. The Walker Street estate in my electorate, demolished in around 2018 or 2019, sat empty for years. The houses are just going up now, while 120,000 people languish on the waiting list for public housing and while 30,000 people in Victoria experience homelessness on any given night. This Labor government has an agenda of privatisation. These are the policies of Thatcher, and this is what they are proud to spruik to the Victorian people. They have just shelved public and community housing projects across the state, including a site in my electorate in Preston handed over to private developers, land that should have been retained to build hundreds more public homes. They have been handing over public land to private developers. What confidence can Victorians have that Labor will not raze these towers to the ground and hand these sites to private developers? They have done it before; they can do it again. No wonder residents are fearful about their futures. This government cannot utter the words 'public housing' anymore, because they do not believe in it anymore. Provide a commitment to rebuild public housing at North Melbourne and Flemington. Not a single public home has been promised at these sites. How can any public housing resident have confidence that they

can return to public housing when you will not utter the words ‘public housing’. Public housing can end homelessness in Victoria.

The Greens have a bill before this Parliament to end homelessness, a plan over 10 years to get that waitlist to zero, get homelessness to zero. We are the only party in this place with a plan to build 100,000 public homes over the next decade. That is what ends homelessness, not giving away the public land that we have to private developers to make megaprofits while people go homeless, living in cars, living in tents, not knowing if they will ever have a roof over their head again.

We have been talking to so many residents who are telling us they do not want to be torn away from their communities. I read their words directly to this chamber, and it is incumbent on every one of us to listen to them. Let us not turn our backs on public housing residents. Let us not kick out people at North Melbourne and Flemington like we did Margaret Kelly. We owe it to Margaret. We owe it to everyone at North Melbourne and Flemington. Save public housing in Victoria.

Council divided on motion.

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

Noes (15): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, David Limbrick, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt

Motion agreed to.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2024–25

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:17): Today I want to draw attention to the budget papers and in specifics the energy output, and I want to talk about where this state is, the difficulties that we face, the challenges we face. I am particularly drawn to the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry paper *Securing Our Energy Future: Policy Paper – Part 1*, June 2024. I pay tribute to the work that has been done by VCCI, the work in this paper and their advocacy for Victorian industry.

The uncertainty that we face is important for industry; it is also important for households. We need as a community to come together and to ensure that we have secure and affordable energy supplies. What we have seen under the current government is surging gas prices, surging electricity prices, insecurity and businesses being forced to flee the state because they cannot get energy at reasonable and reliable prices. This is a disaster waiting for Victoria. It is a disaster that is steadily unfolding, and it is a disaster that is going to hit our basic economics. We have for a long time of course relied on brown coal and the cheap energy that came from that and on gas, in particular from Bass Strait. The failure of this government to allow onshore conventional gas exploration has left us with a 10-year hiatus. The last exploration licences that were granted were granted in 2013 under the then Baillieu government, and then there was a period where no licences were granted and no licences were available. It was a mistake, and we are paying the price for that mistake now.

At the same time we have seen obviously an intention to move to renewables, which we all understand, with a commitment to net zero by 2050 and a need to move to lower emission technologies for the production of energy. But the reliability is not there at the moment, and we look into the future here and we see the state government understands that in 2028 Yallourn will close; it has signed a secret

deal – a dirty secret deal – with the power station there. Nobody knows what is in that deal. We have been waiting since 6 December. That is when the documents motion said they were due. We have been waiting since 6 December for those documents and the truth about what has occurred. In New South Wales the Labor government under Mr Minns did a deal with the power station up there. The details of that are in the public domain, and that stands in stark contrast to the behaviour of the secretive Allan Labor government here and the secretive Minister for Energy and Resources Lily D'Ambrosio.

It is a clear problem though when we are not sure what is going to happen in 2028; it is a clear problem when the reliability of supply is at risk. We have seen the government lay a lot of eggs in one basket in the case of offshore wind, and yet we have seen the problems with offshore wind at Hastings, where the government has been unable to secure federal approvals for the assembly proposals there and for the industrial side of actually making offshore wind farms, which involve large industrial machinery that needs huge construction and assembly activity and needs a long-term plan to actually bring it to fruition. I think it is looking increasingly difficult for this government to get its offshore wind capacity in place in the time that it says. You then look and say, 'Well, what's going to happen if they don't do that?' There is going to be a hiatus in the period from now through until 2032 and possibly beyond to 2035 as well – a significant hiatus which will do huge damage to Victorian households and Victorian industry.

I think it is important, and I am just going to quote briefly from the VCCI paper:

Natural gas is the nexus between today and the net zero future. It is an enabler that ensures an orderly transition to net zero – both domestically and for our regional trading partners.

It goes on:

Studies have shown that transitioning from coal to gas can now reduce our carbon footprint –

and this is true in the United States, I might say –

at a more rapid rate. The International Energy Agency's (IEA) report, *The Role of Gas in Today's Energy Transitions*, exposes that, in the short term, switching from coal to natural gas reduces CO2 emissions.

Gas-fired peaking power plants are needed to support renewables, not replace them. They are the technical partners of renewables.

(Time expired)

Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:23): I rise to make a contribution in regard to the report on the pig welfare inquiry in Victoria, which was tabled in the Legislative Council in June 2024 by the chair of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee Georgie Purcell. I wish to make comment on the minority report.

As is normal practice in committee proceedings, members can file minority reports. However, members of the committee who might have served on that inquiry do not get to see the contents of any minority report before it is tabled. It should be said that such a report can be characterised as nothing more than a gathering of quotes from industry and bizarre allegations about other members on the committee. This is very disappointing to see. So it came as a complete surprise to me as a member of the committee to read the minority report authored by members of the Liberals and Nationals. In short, the minority report casts aspersions and makes spurious allegations involving a number of members on the committee, including me as a Labor member.

The report is a fiction and a fantasy. Amongst the bizarre allegations, in short, the authors of the minority report allege that the chair of the inquiry undermined parliamentary process and did so with the support of Labor members. They also allege that Labor members should have held the chair to

account and that no effort was made to address the chair's public position relating to her concerns about pig welfare in the industry.

David Davis: On a point of order, Acting President, I am listening carefully, and I can see how this contribution relates to a report, but it does appear to be more in the line of a personal explanation, with the member wanting to excuse and explain things that have occurred.

Michael Galea: On the point of order, Acting President, that clearly is not a personal explanation. Ms Terpstra is plainly referring directly to the contents of a committee report.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): I will make a ruling on the point of order. There is no point of order.

Sonja TERPSTRA: The comments and findings are misguided, bizarre and completely without foundation. Firstly, there was no evidence presented to the inquiry about any alleged undermining of parliamentary privilege. In fact the terms of reference of the inquiry did not include any references to this and certainly members on the committee did not raise any matters in a substantial way throughout the hearing, other than generally complaining when matters did not go their way. The minority report also erroneously concludes that Labor members had some kind of obligation to hold the chair to account or address the chair's public position on pig welfare. I note that no such obligation exists. In fact if any such obligations existed, the same could be said for those members who authored the minority report.

Committee hearings and reports are a function of what is put before them and based on the terms of reference. If members want to make accusations about others, this should be done via a substantive motion in the house. However, given the gaps in our standing orders, the authors of this report sought to exploit this and deny any opportunities for members to respond. The lack of professionalism in this minority report is breathtaking. The report can and should be rightly characterised as nothing more than a bizarre personal attack on members who were denied procedural fairness to respond. The allegations are unsupported by any evidence. Consequently, the minority report is nothing more than an unintelligible, emotionally unhinged rant. The report epitomises everything a minority report should not be. It undermines committee processes, especially when it resorts to personally attacking other members of the committee, which does nothing for cohesiveness and engendering collaboration and collegiality on committees. Of course members will disagree on issues, evidence and outcomes. That is normal. But filing a report that contains nothing more than Olympic-level whingeing because the authors of the report did not get their way can only be seen as an embarrassment and a poor reflection on the members who authored it.

In conclusion, I wish to place on record that there is no substance to any allegations contained in that report. I was denied the opportunity to respond. The allegations in that report are grossly unfair, and members should be made to comply with general standing orders in the house and make any accusations by substantive motion.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2024–25

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:27): It is interesting that we are talking about pigs. I thought I would add a contribution on particularly the state budget, but if we look outside Parliament today we might actually see pigs flying, because the state Treasurer has now admitted that we might have reached our limit on new taxes. We may have reached our limit on taxes after introducing 55 new or increased taxes since the 2014 election, when this government said there would be no new or increased taxes. The state Treasurer is now admitting he might have got it wrong in a report in the *Australian Financial Review* titled 'Labor's most indebted state admits it's reached limit on raising taxes' and has pushed businesses to the limit with new taxes.

We only have to look at the statistics to see businesses fleeing our state, businesses closing down, new businesses opening in Queensland, new businesses opening in New South Wales, new businesses opening in South Australia, businesses closing in our state and 5000 fewer new business startups than the previous year. But now we have reached our limit on state taxes. Now is the time for the Treasurer to rule out a new holiday and tourism tax, which I know is going to financially ruin many regional towns. Maybe he can announce that to the regional cities forum. Finally, we get some admission from this state Treasurer that taxes are bad for business. Increased taxes lead to fewer jobs and hurt businesses. We need to get into a situation where we are rolling out the red carpet for business. That side of the chamber just wants to roll out the red tape for business.

We see over and over again examples in other states. In South Australia they have both their Premier and departments calling up Victorian businesses and asking them to come over, talking about their gas policies in particular and how much more friendly their gas policies are towards business compared to our policies where we want to shut gas down in Victoria. We want to rip the stovetops out of people's houses. We want to stop connections to new homes, discriminating against people in growth areas by saying they cannot have gas and discriminating against our multicultural communities by saying they cannot have gas if they are going to get a new house and land package. This is the way Labor governments treat our multicultural communities that want to buy a house and land package in a growth area – by trying to select their energy choices and diminish their chance to have choice and to have a gas connection.

We see other states trying to score businesses from Victoria, and we see businesses closing down. We know the Treasurer has finally admitted that Labor's taxes are having an impact on the economy. But Labor, we know, cannot manage money, and it is Victorians that pay the price with fewer businesses. It is Victorians that pay the price with higher power prices. It is Victorians that pay the price with not having access to gas. Victorians pay the price because of Labor's higher taxes, because of Labor's \$188 billion of debt and because of what we will be paying – \$25 million a day just to pay the interest bill. We saw \$1.3 billion wasted on the east–west link; we saw \$600 million wasted on the Commonwealth Games. When Labor wastes, somebody has to pay for that. Those of us that have worked in other jobs outside of a cushy union office understand that. When Labor wastes, somebody has to pay for it, and it is small businesses that are paying the price. It is our manufacturers, like the mighty manufacturers in the northern suburbs, that are paying the price for Labor's war on gas and who are paying through the nose, paying new waste charges every which way and new fire services levy charges in this state budget. The Treasurer, thankfully, has finally admitted it. He should now come clean and say there will be no new or increased taxes from now on. It is all good to go out to the media and say, 'We might've reached our limit.' Rule it out, Treasurer.

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Victorian Government Report on Multicultural Affairs 2022–23

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (17:32): I rise to update the house on the *Victorian Government Report on Multicultural Affairs 2022–23*, tabled in June of 2024. As one of the members for Northern Metropolitan Region, I am really proud to be part of a vibrant, diverse and inclusive community of multicultural groups from all over the world. I am happy to be a part of a government that continues to support multicultural organisations as we strive towards a more inclusive and representative future. In 2022–23 the Victorian government committed \$63.3 million for programs, initiatives and communications activities that supported both multicultural and faith communities, including \$6.4 million for culturally significant infrastructure upgrades so communities can enjoy culturally safe spaces. Victoria continues to be one of Australia's most culturally diverse states, with about one-third of our population from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. One-third – it is just incredible that in Victoria this represents more than 300 ancestries speaking 290 languages and following almost 200 faiths. There is an incredible snapshot right there of the vast diversity that Victoria enjoys. We are all richer for the vast wealth of knowledge that comes from these communities. I would like to take a moment to thank Minister Stitt, the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, who has

shown significant leadership in this portfolio, including in what has been a very challenging year for social cohesion in our state.

Just recently I was more than happy to go to the Sikh community and visit their gurdwara in Officer on World Environment Day to host an information and awareness session on induction cooking and a demonstration and to bring together representatives from multicultural communities from all around Victoria to express the importance of climate action and taking care of our local environment. Can I give a shout-out to Dr Harpreet Kandra for his leadership and commitment to continued action for multicultural communities. I know, being based out in the south-east, that he is a very fierce and committed protector of multiculturalism and climate action. Whilst he was at it, he decided that he was going to tackle head-on the challenges around people of multicultural communities and water safety. We saw over last summer some very sad drownings in our community, so very recently he has taken it upon himself to set up a learn-to-swim program for multicultural leaders to lead from the front and demonstrate to their communities that even old dogs can learn new tricks and to allow for community-based teaching of swimming in their communities. Thank you to all the community partners that came in to help make that happen. I am still getting photos sent to me all the time, and it looks like it is a real hoot.

This government continues to support, champion and celebrate its multicultural communities, with \$3.3 million committed to supporting Victoria's newly arrived migrant communities, refugees and asylum seekers and improving settlement outcomes. There is a further commitment of \$4.4 million to continue to deliver the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* to help address the social and economic needs of Victorians of African heritage. While I am there, it is worth pointing out that that work is led by the member for Cranbourne, and I would like to acknowledge her extraordinary leadership and commitment to the African diaspora in her community and across the south-east. With this new role with the Victorian African communities, she is extending that passion right across our state, so thank you to the member for Cranbourne for all that she does in fostering social cohesion with our African communities.

This state continues to lead the way in its multicultural diversity and strength of leadership. I welcome this commitment to diversity as we include the 65,000 years of living First Peoples culture and work together towards treaty.

Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria

State of the Birrarung (Yarra) and Its Parklands 2023 Report

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (17:36): I rise to speak on the *State of the Birrarung (Yarra) and its Parklands 2023 Report*. This five-year review of the initial Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act 2017 paints a dire picture of this vital waterway's environmental and ecological health. Fundamentally, the report shows that the river's health was not improved over the past five years. One of the key recommendations underlines the importance of community involvement in improving the habitat and management of the Yarra River and its surroundings. Most of the improvements made along the banks of the river, such as replanting, have been undertaken by passionate community groups. These groups engage volunteers to pitch in and help to care for this vital waterway, so many of the improvements to the Yarra in the past not only five years but 50 years have been community driven.

One of the objectives of Victoria's Water Act 1989 is to maximise community involvement in the making and implementing of arrangements relating to the use, conservation or management of water resources. Harnessing community knowledge and experience and empowering volunteers is the second key recommendation of this report. It will be essential to ensuring the future health and revitalisation of the Yarra River, and it is a recommendation I urge the Labor government to act upon urgently. From an environmental perspective this report must be a wake-up call. All 10 environmental health indicators were marked as deteriorating. A trifecta of invasive plant and animal species, habitat loss and fragmentation as well as climate change are the main drivers of biodiversity decline in the

Yarra catchment. This impacts a vast array of species from the platypus to native fish, invertebrates and the critically endangered Leadbeater's possum.

Other shortfalls include the failure to meet the targets of the *Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037* initiative. The government is yet to permanently protect or revegetate 2.1 million hectares of private land within the catchment. The report also highlights the impact a growing population is having on water resources. It states that long-term surface water availability for the Yarra River has declined by 16 per cent since 2020. In addition, water allocation has yet to be shared equally, with the environment bearing the burden of decreased availability: 28 per cent less water is now available for the environment compared to 5 per cent less water for consumptive use. Inadequate funding continues to be an ongoing burden for non-government organisations and continues to have negative ramifications on the Birrarung. The loss of a dedicated Yarra riverkeeper earlier this year due to lack of funding was an incredibly disappointing thing to see. Funding projects instead of organisations creates unsustainable cycles of funding that restrict the ability to plan and implement long-term sustainable solutions.

It is clear that much more work remains to be done to ensure that the Yarra River remains healthy. This waterway provides Victoria's capital with some of the world's cleanest drinking water, essential green spaces and a key habitat for many endangered and threatened species. The river ecosystem must be healthy not only for human health but for the flora and fauna that rely on this natural corridor connecting the mountains to the sea. This report shows promise for what the Yarra could be and the integral part it could play in ensuring the Victorian government meets its targets of *Biodiversity 2037*. I endorse the recommendations made by the commissioner and call upon the Labor government to action these recommendations to ensure subsequent reports paint a healthier picture for the future of the Yarra, a future which includes genuine community engagement, sustainable funding models and an ongoing commitment to work alongside traditional owners to ensure the best outcomes for people and country.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2024–25

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:40): I rise to make a statement on the 2024–25 budget papers, which were tabled here in May. I specifically just want to make a brief contribution to talk about the state budget's provisions for health care and particularly about our hospitals and how this Labor government continues to invest in our hospital system. In the May state budget \$8.8 billion was allocated for our hospitals, a significant amount of funding, which is helping to maintain Victoria's position as a nationwide leader in delivering outstanding health care to Victorians. In response, obviously, to the increased demand that we are seeing – we know that in the last quarter more than half a million Victorians presented at emergency departments in this state, a record – we are investing an additional \$1.5 billion to support our hospitals and deliver world-class care. That is record funding of more than \$10 billion all up to ensure that all of our constituents have access to the best hospitals in the country.

I do want to take a brief moment, if I may, to particularly talk about the \$118 million that is being invested into the Alfred, funding which will help see the hospital further its life-saving work through upgrades to its operating theatres and intensive care and inpatient units. I was recently not too long ago at the Alfred with our colleague the member for Albert Park, visiting the cardiology ward, seeing the incredible firsthand work undertaken by doctors, nurses and healthcare professionals.

Obviously, in addition to tackling heart disease, we know that tackling cancer is exceptionally important. It is one of the biggest killers of Victorians. More than 30 people die from cancer every day. That is why early diagnosis will be delivered through the new Paula Fox Melanoma and Cancer Centre located on the site of the Alfred – \$24 million that this budget invests into that centre – by installing a Quadra scanner, meaning that Victorians suffering from types of cancer can have earlier

detection, which hopefully helps to boost survival rates, survival rates which are now currently above 70 per cent for both men and women.

There is extra funding of \$35 million being put towards upgrading medical equipment across the state, helping operating suites, emergency departments and neonatal and maternity services. There is also funding to unlock additional surgeries, meaning more surgeries can be completed in this financial year, matching last year's record numbers. Labor delivers for our hospitals. Labor delivers investment in our healthcare system. Labor supports our healthcare workforce. We back our nurses. We back our doctors. We will always stand up for the public healthcare system in this state. We will always invest in the public healthcare system in this state. That is what this latest budget did. That is what this Labor government will continue to do.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Gambling and Liquor Regulation in Victoria: A Follow up of Three Auditor-General Reports

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:43): I rise to speak on a committee report which I have already spoken on in this place. It is the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's *Gambling and Liquor Regulation in Victoria: A Follow up of Three Auditor-General Reports*. This was a most illuminating report and an inquiry I sat on in the last year. Along with other PAEC members, I know I certainly learned a lot. It was a particularly timely report for us to be doing, because it came directly in the wake of the government's announcement of much more stringent regulations around poker machines across suburban Melbourne and regional Victoria, including, amongst other things, most notably, the introduction of a statewide prohibition on electronic gaming machine operations between 4 am and 10 am. We heard extensively from experts at this inquiry about how this was actually very important because you would see trends across pockets in both metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria where you would actually have the various different gambling operators and pokie operators coordinating their mandated shutdown period so that it would be possible for someone to go from venue to venue to venue. I know that Minister Melissa Horne has been working extensively on these reforms. It was very good to see that very fast, very direct feedback from the community and also from those stakeholders who are so invested in this space, and to see that that response was indeed overwhelmingly positive.

We also heard about the impacts of gambling harm. I have spoken before in this place about the youth round table that we conducted in the Parliament, with a mock debate in the Assembly chamber, and how we heard directly from young people and their experiences with gambling. Pokie machines and things that come under state regulation were quite naturally a large focus of our report. I am still struck by a young man Fred, who incurred a six-figure loss when he was barely 20 on online sports gambling. We know that anyone who turned on the TV, anyone who would have seen our wonderful athletes in the Olympics these past few weeks and seen the incredible dance moves of Raygun or anything else at the Olympics, would no doubt have also seen lots and lots and lots of gambling ads.

One recurring thing we also heard across the board from witnesses who appeared in front of our committee. I made a habit of asking them a particular question. The reason I asked this question was because it came in the wake of a very, very significant landmark federal committee report. That is of course the report titled *You Win Some, You Lose More* – much better known, though, as the Murphy report. It was chaired by the late, great, incredible Peta Murphy, a colleague from our side, who we still greatly, greatly miss – the former member for Dunkley. Her legacy in that *You Win Some, You Lose More* report was profound and significant. The central recommendation of that report was for a phase-out of the extreme amount of gambling advertising that we are seeing online, on TV and in various other media. The question I would ask witnesses would be quite simply: 'In reference to that recommendation do you support what the Murphy report calls for?' The response was as emphatic as it was unanimous: yes.

It is now some time since the Murphy report was tabled, and I am very pleased to say that of the many recommendations of our report from PAEC, one of them, recommendation 10, called for the Victorian

government to actively urge the federal government to implement that recommendation of the Murphy report. I am very pleased that we now have the full response from the government of Victoria to our report, in which that recommendation, recommendation 10, is supported in full. There are many conversations, I am sure, that are still to be had at the federal level, but I think it is timely for us to reflect on what has been a very significant contribution not just to our federal Parliament but the whole nation through this landmark Murphy report. It is high time that the Murphy report becomes Murphy's law.

Petitions

Ballarat East substation

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (17:48): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

I will just cut straight to the chase: locals are up in arms against the substation planned to be at 203 York Street, Ballarat East. As the Olympics have just closed, it is like watching a volleyball match of 'Who takes responsibility for this?' It has been back and forth between the state government, Powercor, the Minister for Planning's office and the City of Ballarat, with disinformation and deception characterising many actions that we have seen towards locals. Labor MPs have been dismissive and disinterested, and it was only when they got wind of this petition, that there was also a sudden resurgence of interest. What a surprise – it is like the gold medal of backflipping.

The site is currently part of the residual of an industrial zone in Ballarat East, but over the course of time what was envisaged originally as industrial Ballarat East has now developed into a residential area. Ballarat East is a beautiful suburb known for its close proximity to places like Sovereign Hill, the Eureka rebellion centre and Ballarat Wildlife Park. In short, the reasons why locals oppose the construction and the development of the substation are: (1) the proposed site sits right next to residential properties, literally next to families; (2) the site offers absolutely zero buffer zone, which means that the substation will literally be backing onto people's backyards; (3) amenity – the visual impact is going to be bad enough, but this large metal structure that is going to be constructed will actually have a very annoying buzzing sound, and imagine trying to sleep with that on; (4) the impact on land valuations, which will be significant for locals, is a very real and negative impact that is possible; (5) poor consultation and mixed messages – Powercor have not been up-front or forthcoming with the community, sometimes confirming, sometimes denying that there even is going to be a substation planned there; (6) the health concerns that have been expressed by locals have basically fallen on deaf ears, particularly when you have got 66 kilovolt lines going right over the top; and (7) the environmental impacts on the substation of the nearby Pennyweight Gully, directly opposite to the planned substation, which is in the Yarrowee catchment.

Local Labor MPs have been at the whim of Powercor. They have failed to listen, failed to advocate and failed to understand the impact this has on locals. Alternative locations have not been fully considered, especially the ones that have been proposed by locals. I do not think anyone denies the need for cheap, reliable electricity but it needs to be done right – with proper consultation, genuine engagement and meaningful discussion. This clearly has not been the case – local MPs in Ballarat are basically culpable for not giving a damn.

The Minister for Energy and Resources Ms D'Ambrosio needs to act and act quickly, along with her counterpart Sonya Kilkenny, the Minister for Planning. I am calling on both of those ministers to act – to step up, to take responsibility and to cancel the substation at York Street in Ballarat. Other options which are further away from residential areas must be explored and even more so must be taken seriously. While we are at it, the minister for energy seriously needs to investigate the conduct of Powercor in all this. They have at a minimum been unprofessional towards locals but at worst have been downright mean.

I want to acknowledge the campaigners that have worked so hard to fight this, particularly those that are in the gallery today, Jenny Paterson and Annette McMaster, who really do have the intestinal

fortitude that I wish this government had – two strong, capable women who are fierce advocates for their local communities. But there are many others that have over a long period of time fought for this as well.

I have heard anecdotally that witches hats are already up at the site and that work is almost ready to go, which is typical of this Labor government – bulldozing over communities which speak out against it. There is still time left. It is not too late if you care. The message to the government is clear and simple: do the right thing. Stop the construction of the substation in York Street in Ballarat.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (17:53): I would like to begin by thanking my colleague Joe – Mr McCracken – for bringing a voice for these residents into this chamber. I think that is a really important role that we all play, and I acknowledge those voices, so thank you.

I will give a little bit of background about the status of this land before I sort of go on to some other observations. The land at 203 York Street has been owned by Powercor and its predecessors for a long time. The site is zoned public use zone 1, which supports the use of land for provision of electricity, and this site has been zoned for the purpose of services and utilities since 1973. In the Ballarat planning scheme land zoned public use zone 1 for the provision of services and utilities does not require a planning permit, and Powercor have made it clear that their intention is to exercise their right to build a substation. I understand that local residents and the Ballarat City Council have concerns about the location of a proposed substation in York Street and the amenity effects that it might have on the surrounding area. It is the council's responsibility to appropriately plan for housing and other uses in their municipality, and this site has repeatedly been identified by council for the use Powercor now intends to realise.

I want to acknowledge the people that signed the petition and expressed their concern about this. It reminds me greatly of my time on Warrnambool City Council, my time as a councillor and as a mayor. I appreciate their effort in giving the feedback and expressing their concerns. I remember attending planning application consultation meetings where on the one hand as a councillor you hear from local residents who might be concerned about a particular application, then you hear from applicants who own the land and are applying for a legitimate or appropriate use of that land according to its zoning and then you hear from the planning team at council who provide the technical assessment. My overwhelming memory is how impossible it is sometimes to please everybody and to meet the concerns of everybody, and I deeply feel that in this particular scenario.

The Ballarat East zone substation is proposed to be built at 203 York Street, which when I have a look, is not far from the Red Lion, which I remember. I did go to school in Ballarat, and I do remember the Red Lion Hotel. In fact I think we might have snuck in there on the way back from shopping on Friday night while I was there, so I know the area. Ballarat East is a beautiful suburb, and it deserves to be well planned. It deserves to have its existing community respected, but so do the owners of that piece of land. They have their rights and their status under the zoning of the land. There is no joy in this scenario. I just want to offer my level of respect and appreciation for bringing this forward and raising the issue.

If there is no joy in this scenario, the important thing is that into the future land use planning for new electricity infrastructure under the new SEC will be conducted with full consultation with communities. I implore this privately owned company to absolutely listen to the community and to consult with the community before they go ahead and do anything that they are planning to do. That is the most important thing that they should be doing, like every other private owner who is planning on investing and building in a particular area. I thank you for this opportunity, and I thank my colleague for bringing it forward.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (17:59): I too want to acknowledge the thousands of community members who signed this petition and those who persisted with this campaign and thank Mr McCracken for sponsoring this petition in the Parliament. I think the petition demonstrates the

strength of community feeling on the issue and the community's frustration at the failure of the state government to listen and act on their concerns. What we have heard from the local members for this area are empty words and attempts to shift the responsibility to the council, despite the fact that the council has been advocating to the state government on their behalf on this issue.

The reality is that community wishes have been ignored in this process, and the state Minister for Planning has the power to intervene. It is becoming a familiar story with this Labor government, and it persists with this approach at its peril. Continual failure to listen to and engage with the community, failure to communicate transparently and failure to acknowledge and accept responsibilities that lie with state government show contempt for communities and only breeds resentment and anger. I will keep my contribution on this short, but I think this petition is a real sign of what this community has experienced and the fact that they feel they have not been listened to. This is really the only other avenue they can find to try and get their concerns heard, and we would urge the government to listen to the signatories of this petition.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:00): I too join my colleagues from Western Victoria in thanking Mr McCracken for bringing the petition forward and the petitioners who worked so hard to gather the 2000 print signatures required to be able to ensure that this matter is brought before the Parliament in a debate today. Consultation is something that this government cannot approach in any way, shape or form, especially in the energy space. We have had years of lack of consultation over transmission lines across the Western Victoria Region. The government have been totally belligerent in their approach to how they deal with communities – communities being torn apart over the outrageous proposition of the Western Renewables Link and the VNI West proposal. It just happens every day.

We had Ms Ermacora suggest that the SEC would be a whole new world of consultation. I have got news for her: VicGrid is up and running, and there is no better consultation happening now than happened four years ago in relation to transmission lines and energy infrastructure. They do not care about communities, they do not care about the environment and they have no sympathy whatsoever for people being decimated by poor planning in the infrastructure in relation to the energy space. Until the government wake up and realise that they have a responsibility to ensure that communities are consulted, the environment is protected and we have infrastructure that is for the next hundred years, not the next election, we are going backwards in this state.

It is an appalling situation, and here is just a local example of how they have got it so wrong. I am disgusted that the local Labor members have failed to interact with the community group and petitioners. What do they think their job is as a local member if not to listen to the voices of their constituents? It is shameful for the Minister for Energy and Resources to take no interest, for the Minister for Planning to not intervene in this matter. As Dr Mansfield said, the Minister for Planning could intervene straightaway. She could order the witches hats to be removed tomorrow and Powercor to lay down their tools and find another spot for this piece of infrastructure.

The government have to stop running roughshod over individuals, over households, over communities. It has to end. If they do not do it in this instance, we know they are never going to do it anywhere. I have seen the devastation in lives and livelihoods from this proposal for the transmission projects across the region, into the outskirts of Ballarat, from Sydenham through to the New South Wales border now. It is just outrageous. Potato farms near Ballarat are under threat, the biolinks are under threat and here is a case of a piece of energy infrastructure in the middle of a housing area that probably should not go ahead, even if it was on the planning books since 1970 or whenever it was. They should have realised that they had allowed houses to be built around it, and that was a mistake of government and council. They should retract from that ridiculous situation, listen to these petitioners and stop Powercor acting any further. Let us get a proposal where we have infrastructure for energy and we get it right. Thank you to Mr McCracken, thank you to the petitioners, thank you to Dr Mansfield for her contribution and let us ensure that this ridiculous proposal ends now.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (18:05): Thank you for all the contributions on this. I listened quite intently to the government speaker on this. Basically they said, ‘We hear you, but we don’t care. We’re going ahead anyway.’ They mentioned that the site had been put forward since 1973. Need I remind the house that that was 51 years ago. Things have changed since 1973. A whole community has grown up around this site, with neighbourhoods and real people that they say they represent, they say they care about. Clearly they do not. ‘Sorry, but tough luck’ is what the message was from the government. I have literally had people in tears over this. Their lives are being ruined. Their livelihoods, their houses, the homes that they brought up their kids in have been ruined because of this proposal, and the Minister for Planning, the Minister for Energy and Resources – where are they? Nowhere. They do not respond. They do not care. These are real people with real issues continuing to be ignored. Both ministers need to pull up their socks and act. The first thing they should do is come onsite and listen. That is all that is being asked of them: listen. Petitioners have been arguing for this for so long just to have a voice, just to be heard. The last thing we want is for a beautiful neighbourhood like Ballarat East to have a big, ugly substation rammed right in the middle of it. Of course if the government had listened, they would know that, and if they have been listening, they are not doing anything about it, which is typical.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

State Civil Liability (Police Informants) Bill 2024

Introduction and first reading

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (18:08): We have a message from the Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council ‘A Bill for an Act to limit the civil liability of the State by extinguishing causes of action in relation to the provision of information and other assistance by specified human sources and for other purposes.’

Lizzie Blandthorn (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (18:08): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (23): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Katherine Copey, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, David Limbrick, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (13): Melina Bath, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Lizzie Blandthorn: I move:

That the second reading be made an order of the day in one week.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (17): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (19): Melina Bath, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Samantha Ratnam, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Motion negatived.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:19): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 511, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Youth Justice Bill 2024

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Harriet Shing:

That the bill be now read a second time.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:19): (*By leave*) I think what is required now is the circulation of amendments. I have already spoken. I was just going to say that I would be very happy to have those circulated now.

Amendments circulated pursuant to standing orders.

David DAVIS: If I could indicate that there will be another small tranche of amendments which respond to the government's amendments, and they are being produced as we speak. I am just indicating that Vivienne and others are doing their very best.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Thank you for that courtesy, Mr Davis.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:21): I rise to speak on the Youth Justice Bill 2024. Moving the Greens amendments in my colleague Katherine Copsey's name, I ask that they be circulated now.

Amendments circulated pursuant to standing orders.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: My colleague Katherine Copsey outlined our amendments yesterday in her second-reading speech, and she will speak to them in more detail in the committee stage. I will just make some brief comments now regarding raising the age. One of the substantial sets of amendments that the Greens are moving is to raise the age of criminal responsibility. It is currently 10 years of age. The bill before us would raise it to 12, and the Greens amendments raise that further to 14 years of age. Pretty much every member of this place, or the other, has rattled off those ages. But I would like us to just take a moment to think about those kids. Overwhelmingly we are talking about primary school aged children – primary school age. If you are aged 10, you are most likely in year 4. If you are 11, you would be in year 5, and so on. Many in this place will have a 10-year-old child or remember when their child was that age. To the members on my right, who are likely to vote against this bill and who want to keep the age of criminal responsibility at 10, I ask you to think about when your child was 10 or 11 years old. The bill does raise the age to 12, but it was developed in tandem with regular,

clear commitments from the former Premier, the current Premier, the Attorney-General and other ministers that the age would be raised to 14 in 2027.

Then we saw yesterday, spectacularly, shamefully – honestly, treacherously – the Premier kicking an own goal in announcing that that then would not happen. For members of this Labor government who want us to believe that 12- and 13-year-olds should be able to be held criminally responsible for years to come – that is a decision that goes against all expert medical, legal and human rights evidence to the contrary. It is a shameful, shameful decision, and it is no wonder the community – particularly the First Nations community – are now feeling terribly betrayed. These are the same kids who everyone, from the Prime Minister down, says should be protected from social media at these ages. But now we see Labor deciding they do not need to be protected from exposure to the criminal justice system, and all this does is pipeline kids into a terribly sad future. Shame on this government.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:26): I rise to make a contribution to the Youth Justice Bill 2024 on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria. Despite some contentious elements, there has been significant stakeholder support for this bill. This bill follows extensive consultation and implements key recommendations of the *Youth Justice Review and Strategy*. There is a hope that these reforms will reduce offending, improve community safety and provide genuine opportunities for young people to turn their lives around. Indeed the guiding youth justice principles in this bill put prevention, diversion, minimum intervention, partnership and family at the forefront of youth justice. This bill also makes principles specific to Aboriginal children and young people a small part of the broader reforms in this bill that address Yoorook’s recommendation 36: to explicitly embed guiding principles specific to Aboriginal children and young people in all aspects of the youth justice system. But at the heart of this bill is raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 years of age to 12.

We were blindsided by this government’s eleventh hour announcement that they were walking away from their commitment to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14, and we will bring forward a number of amendments in this bill to toughen bail laws. Make no mistake: this was a reactive political decision made out of fear. We currently have one of the lowest ages of criminal responsibility in the world – there are 73 other countries that have set a minimum age of 14 or above – and this decision ignores the evidence. The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, the Human Rights Law Centre, WEStjustice, Youthlaw, the Law Institute of Victoria, Humanists Victoria, the Federation of Community Legal Centres, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, the Centre for Multicultural Youth, the Australian Medical Association, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association and many others all support raising the age to 14. They acknowledge the medical evidence that children have not yet developed the social, emotional and intellectual maturity necessary for criminal responsibility. Children aged 12 and 13 are still developing cognitive function and things like impulsivity, reasoning and consequential thinking. Imprisoning children under 14 has been shown to have long-lasting impacts that make them more likely to reoffend.

This government has fallen victim to fearmongering. The reality is that the data from Crime Statistics Agency Victoria showed youth offender incidents have remained relatively stable when accounting for longer term population growth. Beyond this, the 2024 crime rate still remains lower than figures recorded before the pandemic began. We know from the work of the Sentencing Advisory Council that the earlier a child comes into contact with the justice system, the more likely they are to reoffend and enter the adult system. These statistics are significantly higher again for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. But this is not the first time this government has backflipped on youth justice and, quite frankly, we are really tired of it.

Earlier this year Deputy Premier Ben Carroll said to the Youth Parole Board that they had all they needed when speaking about the decision not to pursue electronic monitoring for youth offenders. Yet mere months later this government backflipped on their commitment to overhaul youth bail. Instead they announced a two-year electronic monitoring trial for 14- to 18-year-olds charged with serious

offences as part of their bail conditions. This \$34.4 million program is not backed by evidence. In fact this technology is prone to malfunctions and false alerts and it stigmatises the wearer and worsens the already strained relationship between young offenders and the justice system.

This is a government of backflippers that will be remembered for putting politics over people. On the one hand, this government recognises the importance of diverting young people out of the criminal justice system and of restorative justice. There are extensive diversionary measures in this bill to prevent formal contact with the criminal justice system and a hierarchy of options to respond to youth offending that prioritise a warning or a caution where possible. Diversions help reduce crime. They are a goal central to a rights-focused youth justice system under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. When it comes to restorative justice, this bill includes a new pre-charge group conferencing model as a process in which the child, together with family and professionals, meets with the victim or representative to discuss the impact of their offending and a tangible plan to take responsibility and make amends for their actions. It is about holding them to account. These programs have been shown to reduce offences and recidivism and rehabilitate young people, particularly young people in out-of-home care.

But on the other hand, this government broke their promises and blindsided us with changes to the bill that are clearly succumbing to the pressures to be tough on crime. I mean, personally this bill has really hit home for me because as a teenager I was navigating the world without a place to call home, and this left me in a vulnerable and unstable position – likely not such a different position to a large proportion of the children currently in contact with the youth justice system. The reality was I was just trying to survive. I was disconnected from my community and I felt unsupported. I definitely made some poor choices during that time of my life and did things that could have very well seen me end up entering the youth justice system. But I have come full circle from being what would be considered a troubled youth to helping shape our youth justice laws in Victoria.

Just a little bit more on some of the young people who are interacting with the youth justice system: the Victorian Auditor-General's Office reported in August 2018 that young people in detention are some of the most disadvantaged in our state. Many have experienced socio-economic disadvantage, family breakdown and drug abuse. Trauma experienced by young people can harm their brain development and impair cognitive growth, creating long-lasting problems. These are some of the most vulnerable in our community, and this approach at least is a step in the right direction towards providing restorative support and justice for young people who do just need a bit of support around them and do need to be provided that.

Previously the Youth Parole Board reported that many of these young people had complex needs. It found that 71 per cent were victims of abuse, trauma and neglect; 26 per cent had intellectual impairments; 40 per cent had mental health problems; 32 per cent were subject to a past child protection order and 18 per cent were subject to a current order; and 11 per cent accessed disability services compared with 7 per cent in the equivalent cohort not in contact with justice system. These are the most vulnerable in our community, and it is our shame to not be there representing them to make sure that they have that support network around them, that they are in contact with the people who can provide that support for them and who understand what their needs are. Young people can be helped to make good decisions through access to education and a safe and stable home environment. This is why justice reinvestment and preventative measures that get young people on pathways away from the criminal justice system before they enter it are so important. When a young person is failed by those meant to protect them, it is left to the rest of us to guide them in the right direction.

Legalise Cannabis Victoria will be moving amendments to ensure that the Youth Parole Board is bound by the rules of natural justice. I would like to circulate those amendments now please.

Amendments circulated pursuant to standing orders.

Rachel PAYNE: Clause 606(2) of this bill provides that the Youth Parole Board is not bound by the rules of this fundamental part of the justice system when exercising its functions. The doctrine of natural justice lies in unbiased adjudication, knowledge of the case against a person, the provision of reasons for an adverse decision and the right to a review of a decision. The government must adhere to this fundamental part of the justice system, particularly in the context of decisions by the parole board that directly affect the right to liberty. The continued exclusion of natural justice undermines the integrity of decision-making processes and public confidence in the system. This government has said that the removal of the exclusion would make parole processes more adversarial. I think the exact opposite is true. The existing exemption risks decisions being unfair, inconsistent and influenced by irrelevant factors. According to the explanatory memorandum and conversations we had with the government, this exclusion in part exists to allow the board to make timely and efficient decisions. This Orwellian justification is inconsistent with what we have been told by stakeholders who have sat on these boards before. If timeliness is a concern, perhaps hire and train more staff. Do not deny young people and children the right to natural justice. We believe the board should be bound by natural justice and this provision removed.

We share many of the concerns raised by stakeholders we have engaged with when considering this bill, and with this in mind we will be supporting the Greens' amendments, who we commend for bringing forward this wide range of amendments that will improve this bill. We want to better regulate new police powers to transport, detain, use force on and search children aged 10 and 11. We do not want children in adult prisons. We want bail reforms, we want the age of criminal responsibility raised to 14 and we do not want electronic monitoring. But more than anything what we want is a government that works for people and not for politics. This is not the government that we are seeing today.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:38): I move:

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

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

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (18:38): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Kialla West Primary School pedestrian crossing

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:39): (1048) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action that I seek is that the minister instruct Regional Roads Victoria to finally carry out the substantial safety upgrades that are so desperately needed to the pedestrian crossing at Kialla West Primary School, which is located on the Goulburn Valley Highway. I first spoke on the matter of safety at the Kialla West Primary School crossing in 2018, almost six years ago, soon after a car picking up children from school was hit by a truck at the school crossing, leaving a mother and three young students seriously injured. One of those students still suffers from the consequences of that accident today. I have raised this matter every single parliamentary year since then, often several times a year, repeatedly pleading for the government to make a serious investment in improving safety at this school crossing. Today is the 22nd time I have spoken on it in Parliament, and I will keep speaking about it as long as the government fails to take any serious action. A concerned parent whose child attends Kialla West Primary School recently contacted me to say that it is increasingly evident that the measures in place at the crossing are insufficient to ensure the safety of the students and the school community.

The school sits on the Goulburn Valley Highway, a major arterial road used by thousands of freight trucks every day. The highway drops from 100 kilometres down to 80 kilometres at the stretch of road where the school is. Near the school the road is signed for 40 kilometres during drop-off and pick-up

times, but the truth is that these signs are not always seen or heeded by visitors and even familiar locals. The danger at the crossing is about to be made worse by two new factors. First, the state Labor government has basically given up on building the Shepparton bypass, which would have diverted trucks away from the school. This means that heavy freight traffic outside the school will be a reality not only for the foreseeable future but for many years to come. Secondly, the government is planning to build a new kinder on the school site which is due to open in term 1 2026. The kinder will increase student numbers and car traffic along the highway and the school's access roads.

If Regional Roads Victoria is going to deliver the optimal safety improvement, it needs to build a pedestrian underpass to separate students from highway traffic, and it should be done before the new kinder opens and traffic booms. However, I am aware that there is a heritage issue with trees due to the school being located within the Calder Woodburn Memorial Avenue, which spans 20 kilometres and includes over 2400 native trees. The heritage issue has been known for many years now, and the government needs to sort it out. But given those trees were planted by a father who lost his son in World War II, I would like to think that Mr Woodburn would be in favour of a few trees being removed and replacement ones planted at the end of the avenue to improve safety and perhaps save lives at the crossing. If an underpass cannot be achieved, the government must come up with an alternative plan to improve safety at this crossing as soon as possible.

Electoral reform

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:42): (1049) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Premier, and the action that I seek is that she accepts the recommendations of the Electoral Matters Committee by finally abolishing group voting tickets. This place is the only Parliament in the country that still uses an undemocratic group voting system that disempowers people from making their own choices on which parties they elect and actively elects people based on their ability to pay a guy \$55,000 – no joke. Ninety per cent of people in Victorian elections vote above the line, which means that they can choose one political party and leave the rest up to the party. Currently what happens with the preferences from this vote is decided by the political parties in secret. Deals are made, and parties can work with whoever they want, meaning that people may vote for a progressive party and find their preference heading off on a little magical journey that may elect or support a much less progressive party – and they would never even know. It has led to people being elected to this Parliament with as little as 2500 votes from a region of around half a million people and left 35,000, who had all voted for another candidate, unrepresented. That is not how representative democracy works, but it is an example of how backroom deals are used to harvest the preferences of many micro-parties and direct them in the same direction for a fee – the \$55,000.

No shade on current MPs who have been legitimately elected through the current system, but I cannot help but think about how many incredible people with strong support in their community have not been elected. I cannot help but think about all the incredible people who may not have even put their hand up because they knew their efforts would be meaningless to fight a system designed to keep them out – the diverse and marginalised people that in a fair system could feel empowered to run. We are the last place in the country to keep this unfair and undemocratic system. Labor, please get rid of group voting tickets and put the preference whisperer out of business.

Taxation

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:44): (1050) My adjournment matter this evening is to the Treasurer. Actually it is probably to the Premier. I am going to ask the Premier, not the Treasurer, but I will make some comments about the Treasurer and his comments today, because he admitted that he has pushed business in the state to the limit with new taxes. We know that Victoria is the highest taxed state in the country, and these taxes are hurting Victorians. Whether it is Victorian businesses or Victorian households, they are hurting Victorians. Because of this government's appalling financial management of taxpayer money, the economic situation of the state is very perilous.

This brings me to the issue where the Premier has said that \$1.5 billion will be provided to health services but those health services do not know how big a slice of the \$1.5 billion pie they are going to get. It is very unclear. There is no clarity around that. As I have said, the Treasurer has said today that the \$1.5 billion that is going to be put back into health will lead to additional service cuts and higher taxes. This is just an incredibly concerning situation. We have got the Premier saying and doing one thing. The Treasurer is out there saying, 'I cannot do it; we have taxed businesses to the max. You are going to have to rein in spending and there are going to be service cuts.' No-one knows where these service cuts are coming from. The Premier would not even answer the basic questions around these very important issues that Victorians want answered – they want to know. Premier, you have said you would give \$1.5 billion to health services. The Treasurer is saying, 'I have taxed everyone to the max, they are maxed out and service cuts will happen.' What I want to know is: how many cuts to health services will be applied as a result of the Treasurer's confirmation today that service cuts will be undertaken and higher taxes will also occur?

As I said, this is a shocking state of affairs in Victoria, where we have got this very perilous financial situation of the government's own making. The waste and mismanagement over a decade has been extraordinary, and it is Victorians who are paying the price. Labor cannot manage money, they cannot manage projects and they certainly cannot manage our health system.

Women's centre of excellence

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:47): (1051) My adjournment matter is for the minister for sport. I, like many Australians, have spent the last few weeks captivated by the Paris Olympics, in awe of these great feats of human physicality. These Olympics were Australia's most successful ever. Our female athletes accounted for over half of the 53 medals. Ten of those medals were won by Victorian women. I want to take a moment to shout out to some of the female athletes who I particularly enjoyed cheering along from home: Arisa Trew, the 14-year-old skateboarder who became the youngest ever Australian to claim gold at the games; Jess and Noémie Fox, the sisters who canoed their way to the top every time they got out on the water; Nicola Olyslagers and Eleanor Patterson, who claimed silver and bronze in the women's high jump; Saya Sakakibara, who we all watched bounce back from an injury to claim gold in the BMX racing; the entire women's swimming team, who dominate the field at every Olympics; our Matildas, who always do us proud no matter the result; and, although she is not Australian, Imane Khelif, the Algerian boxer who claimed gold while showing so much strength and grace in the face of unfounded online hate. These women and many more who competed at the games are a beacon of inspiration for young women, and old, all around Australia.

World-class athletes like our Olympians need world-class facilities to train and learn in. In my region the women's centre of excellence at Casey Fields is an elite level sporting facility currently in development. It will be the only rectangular venue capable of hosting elite-level training and competition outside of the Melbourne CBD. \$43.29 million has already been invested by the City of Casey and the Melbourne City Football Club to develop the Casey Fields precinct, but further funding is required to complete the women's centre. I ask: will the minister commit funding to this new women's sporting complex so our female athletes have the best opportunity possible to reach their potential and go for gold?

Health services

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:50): (1052) Our regional hospitals are under significant pressure with staff shortages, long surgery waitlists and a big gap in the life expectancy of city and country residents. I would like to draw the Minister for Health's attention to the value of investing in the latest robotic technology to deliver more critical surgeries in Northern Victoria and reduce long waiting lists. Today surgeons are trained on robotic machines because they offer superior precision and control. Patient outcomes are better – they recover quicker and they spend less time in hospital – which frees up space for more surgeries to be performed. Robot-assisted surgery helps reduce the

pressure on our hospital system because patients have shorter hospital stays. Other benefits over traditional surgery include a quicker return to normal activity, reduced blood loss, less scarring and reduced surgical complications.

In Victoria this robotic technology is used at hospitals in Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat, but there is none in Bendigo or anywhere in Northern Victoria, a region that covers over 100,000 square kilometres and nearly half of the state. I commend the work of St John of God hospital in Bendigo. They are seeking to purchase a refurbished robotic machine for \$2 million and have already raised over \$1 million through the generous support of donors. One machine can support 1000 surgeries each year and would help reduce the long surgery waitlists and the time a patient spends in hospital. It would also help attract more specialists to work in regional Victoria and improve patient outcomes.

Over the last decade surgery waitlists have blown out to record levels. The action I seek is for the minister to ensure that this latest technology is accessible to residents of Northern Victoria and to consider how private and public hospitals can partner together to help reduce surgery waiting lists.

Katamatite-Shepparton Main Road

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (18:52): (1053) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety in the other place. The Katamatite-Shepparton Main Road is the link for the communities of Cobram, Katamatite, Invergordon, Katandra West, Tallygaroopna and Congupna with Shepparton. Hundreds of trucks, buses, cars and motorcycles travel this road daily. I have already raised the condition of this road with the minister several times, to no avail. In the past few weeks sections of this road have crumbled down to the dirt base and large dangerous potholes have formed. Constituents have reported vehicles being thrown off course by these dangerous conditions. These damaged sections of road are almost impossible to see on the foggy mornings this area has been having. There are no warning signs for drivers of these dangerous conditions ahead. The action I seek is for the minister to redirect Regional Roads Victoria to rectify the dangerous conditions of the Katamatite-Shepparton Main Road as soon as possible to ensure the safety of the great number of travellers using it every day.

Homelessness

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:53): (1054) My adjournment is for the Minister for Housing. In 2021 Mornington Peninsula shire declared a housing crisis. Since then we have seen more and more of our community's most vulnerable become homeless. On any given night more than 600 people in the area are sleeping rough. Under Labor, bare essentials have become more and more expensive. Residents on lower incomes cannot afford to pay for food or clothes or to have a roof over their head. It is now more expensive to live on the Mornington Peninsula than it is here in the city. With more facing homelessness every week, it is not enough for the Mornington Peninsula to have only one crisis accommodation centre. Minister, the action that I seek is for you to commit to finally providing suitable housing support for the residents of the Mornington Peninsula.

Avian influenza

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:54): (1055) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Agriculture, and the action I seek is for her to provide an update on the methods being used to kill farmed birds affected by pathogenic strains of avian influenza. Last month it was reported that more than a million chickens and ducks would be killed to halt the spread of bird flu, which has now reached at least seven farms in Victoria, making it Australia's largest outbreak. The number of birds killed is more than double that in Victoria's last outbreak in 2020. Typically farms required to kill large numbers of animals will engage in what the industry calls humane destruction and disposal, but we know that when it comes to intensively farmed animals there is no such thing. What is even more concerning is that due to a global shortage of CO₂ farms in the United States and Europe are being forced to use what veterinarians describe as the most inhumane methods available.

One of these barbaric practices involves spraying firefighting foam in the faces of birds, which kills them by slowly cutting off their air supply. As a last resort, which is often the case for ducks, who can hold their breath, farms are engaging in a process called ventilation shutdown. Basically, they shut off all air supply, and the animals die when temperatures inside their cages finally become catastrophic. This is a horrific death by heat stroke, organ failure or suffocation that has been likened to the experience of a dog who is left in a car on a hot day.

During the recent inquiry I chaired into pig welfare in Victoria it was found that CO₂, although common practice, can cause high levels of pain and stress. The Australian Veterinary Association in their evidence stated that every animal wants to protect themselves from suffocation. When CO₂ levels rise in the bloodstream it is inherently aversive, because the animal cannot breathe. The methods used to stun and slaughter farmed animals are hidden from public perceptions for a reason, and when they are happening to millions of animals instead of thousands of animals their suffering is intensified. So too is the likelihood of ineffective slaughter. Some animals might some survive their first and even their second attempt to be killed, and we have no way of ever truly understanding the suffering that this can cause.

It is not at all surprising that the government is not advertising the kinds of methods being used to kill birds in current outbreaks in Victoria, but if we are adopting faster and more inhumane methods in line with other countries, our consumers deserve to know this. I hope the minister can provide an update on how these birds are being killed.

Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:57): (1056) My adjournment is for the Premier, and the action I seek is for the Premier to provide transparency and action to remove the organised criminal activity and criminals and bullies from taxpayer-funded worksites and also to address the very concerning issues regarding the involvement of the CFMEU in the Victorian building industry. Victorians have been subjected to enormous blowouts by this government, which are now in excess of \$40 billion. The costs in the building industry have taken a chunk of this money. There have been underhanded, thuggish demands for more money to secure commercial building projects, particularly here in Victoria, and that means that our cost of living has been decimated in all areas – around health, education, roads, justice, child protection and housing and basically in the provision of everyday general services.

Prime construction companies on major projects quietly pass those extra costs onto investors or taxpayers knowing there is safety in numbers. Many smaller operators struggling to compete knew that they had no chance of survival if they did not concede to union demands onsite. Now this money that has been demanded by unsavoury characters within the CFMEU has impacted all of us as Victorians, and it has impacted our standard of living here. In the *Age* I note it says that:

The CFMEU assigned a senior Bandidos bikie enforcer to work as a union organiser on major Victorian government construction projects and to sit on the governing board of the John Setka-led union branch, a role he was allowed to keep even after he was charged over a violent assault.

We have record numbers of people mentioning bullying and intimidation, and I hate to think what might be going on now to keep some of those people silent.

Reports show that on Victorian building sites our project costs have jumped by a staggering 30 per cent since March 2020. According to the *Age* again, the Victorian government:

... is being advised on its industrial relations strategy by a senior manager ... who is in a relationship with a high ranking CFMEU official being investigated by police for ... corruption.

I could go on and on and on, and I will actually bring up some of these issues again when I have the opportunity to speak on it. The union needs to be answerable to the taxpayer. It is the taxpayer that has funded sites that we are talking about, and these exorbitant cost blowouts on major projects need to be

regulated. The Liberals have proposed a royal commission, and we look forward to hearing from the Premier.

Victoria Government Gazette

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:00): (1057) My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Premier, although I am happy for it to be redirected as appropriate. The *Government Gazette* performs an important function as the central repository of all government statutory actions. On any given week there might be notices published on planning scheme changes, new regulations being adopted, compulsory acquisitions of land and declarations of new roads or major projects. If a person wanted to know what the government was doing, they would not follow the actions in this place; they would read through the *Government Gazette*.

The website, however, is an absolute mess. It looks like it was designed in the mid-1990s and has not been updated since. Worse than the outdated style is the complete lack of functionality. To search for relevant documents is a tedious process that might take hours of sifting through various irrelevant information to find the documents that you are looking for. None of this should be taken as criticism of the staff, as I am sure they do a decent job and are likely frustrated by the situation also. The gazette is a responsibility of the government to manage, and while they might be meeting their obligation to publish relevant documents, it is hardly managed in a way that promotes transparency. One of my staff is an avid reader of the gazette and wrote to them to complain about the website in late 2022, with staff responding that they were in the planning stages of updating the website in January 2023. My request is for the government to update the functionality of the *Government Gazette* website.

Biosecurity

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (19:01): (1058) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Agriculture and concerns biosecurity, in particular the adequacy of the rural and regional truck wash network. In September last year AgVic used money raised from levies from the sale of cattle, sheep, goats and pigs and their carcasses in Victoria to commission research on these important facilities. The final report of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) was published as the *Truck Wash and Effluent Disposal Review*. I welcome this step but want to update the minister on concerns which have been raised with me about how quickly the situation has changed. In essence since the completion of the review, truck wash facilities in Warrnambool and now Camperdown have closed, leaving a substantial gap in coverage. The previous network worked because, although the number of sites was relatively low, their placement gave good geographical coverage, like the knots in a net. The closure of the Warrnambool and Camperdown truck washes leaves a gaping hole in that net.

The Warrnambool saleyard facility was particularly crucial. The AgVic DEECA review I named earlier placed it in its highest use category at more than 40 hours per week. Taken together with the closure of the Camperdown saleyard site, this now means that the report's conclusion is no longer accurate. While it may have been true in September 2023 that, and I quote:

The review found strong evidence of a functional regional and rural truck wash network serving the needs of the livestock industry across Victoria ...

This is no longer the case. Lacking this infrastructure could have substantial biosecurity consequences as well as costing enormous amounts of time and money by necessitating long journeys to alternative facilities. Farmers in the south-west, the heart of dairy country and close to recent avian flu outbreak sites, are deeply concerned by this situation. Given the importance of this infrastructure and substantial biosecurity levies already raised from the industries involved, the action I seek from the minister is a new and rapid review of the network and a commitment to build adequate new facilities where substantial gaps are found.

Powerful owl

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:04): (1059) My question is for the Minister for Environment in the other place, Minister Dimopoulos. In particular what I am keen to understand on behalf of the locals in my electorate of Ringwood is what work, if any, has been done in terms of assessments, surveys, investigations and audits in respect to the endangered powerful owl. The powerful owl first came to my attention because a local constituent wrote to me and was quite concerned, and in fact they believed they had come across an area which is an important habitat for this endangered bird species. I had the great privilege just last night after Parliament had finished to join, with a couple of torches, two individuals, Jordan and Blake. They both work for the Victorian National Parks Association. In my spare time what I am doing is looking for powerful owls. What I actually learned along the way was quite remarkable.

Within seconds Blake, who had unbelievable eyesight – much better than mine, no surprise there – was able to spot, like being back on a safari in the middle of the Serengeti, possums and birds like you would not believe. It was an absolute delight. At one point we went along a creek bed; I will not reveal the location because I am told in this particular area it is not advisable to do so. The last thing we want is a team or horde of individuals locally – much as we love them all – going looking for powerful owls. Nonetheless I digress. We went down this creek bed and there was a tree. It did not look like the most beautiful tree, I must say, but it was pointed out, I think by Jordan at that point, that that tree was not only a significant habitat for butterflies but also at certain times of the year for moths as well. I thought that if children knew that tree was so important, notwithstanding its lack of beauty – I may have been in that category myself at some time during my life – they would know how important that tree was, notwithstanding my own importance to at least myself. But I digress way too much.

The point here is the powerful owl, and what I am seeking from the minister in addition is an assurance that some or any works have been done in respect to the whole corridor that is affected by the North East Link Program. As we know, the North East Link Program extends all the way from Bundoora to Bulleen and down to my electorate of Ringwood up to Springvale Road, where they intend to use some of the parklands. Very soon our constituents will see that tree after tree – forest after forest, in other words – will be demolished. I am extremely concerned that not only the habitat of the powerful owl might be adversely affected but for this endangered species. This beautiful species is a species which actually eats possums. So for those of you that do not like possums, the powerful owl is your best friend – no possums. I am feeling for those who love possums. Nonetheless I love the powerful owl, and I would love those assurances from the minister. I invite him also to visit one night or evening with me and take a look at the powerful owl.

Energy costs

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (19:07): (1060) My matter for the adjournment tonight is for the attention of the Minister for Energy and Resources. I notice the minister for energy's social media feed. I occasionally do look at it, and others look at it and tell me what they think. But I notice that she is moving around the countryside to different places, with jovial bits of social media that show her saying that solar is great. I want to be on the record here, and I say solar is great. It is fantastic. It plays a significant role for many people. It does give another option and it does give people the ability to access power outside the grid. However, some of this is a little bit dishonest. The minister is trying to say that things are cheaper, but actually the price of electricity for households and businesses has increased. Last year the figures from St Vincent's were very clear: electricity was up 28 per cent for households and 22 per cent for gas. These are up, up, up. The minister likes to point to the default offer and say it has come off a tiny bit. It has come off a little smidge, but actually it has been up, up, up, and people are paying far more. Even with solar, many people are paying far more. Certainly the people I speak to and the businesses I speak to are being clobbered. They are being smashed. I notice that the minister is not attending many businesses in this; it is mainly households. She is moving around.

What I want her to do is to actually publish the average prices that people with solar are paying and the prices that people without solar are paying. There are still some feed-in tariffs and cross-subsidies that help some people. The feed-in tariffs, as everyone will understand, had the ribbons cut out of them. There is not much left in them for many people. I think what is required here is for the minister to be more honest instead of being fundamentally dishonest in the way that she is approaching some of this, claiming that everything is cheaper; whereas actually even with solar, people are paying more, family budgets are being smashed, and when it comes to businesses, those businesses are doing it very, very tough indeed. It is a little bit disingenuous and it is a bit unkind to a lot of these households and businesses to be dragging them along in a sort of dishonest way like this. I would encourage her to have proper publications that actually compare the prices, compare previous prices and show the increase in prices that households and businesses are facing.

Wallan road infrastructure

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (19:10): (1061) My adjournment is directed towards the Minister for Transport Infrastructure in the other place, and the action I seek is for the minister to provide a clear construction timeline for the Watson Street interchange in Wallan. It sure was interesting to see the member for Yan Yean Ms Kathage and the federal member for McEwen Rob Mitchell claiming credit for the completion of a business case for the Watson Street interchange. The business case is not available to the public, and even if we are to accept the fact that it has now been completed, it was promised to be completed, according to Major Road Projects Victoria, in early 2024. Last time I checked it was August.

Even though they were late, at least they previously gave us a rough date. The official project timeline in the project overview now says planning work continues in mid to late 2024, with no timeline on when construction will begin. Major Road Projects Victoria itself acknowledges that the project is jointly funded by a \$50 million 2019 contribution by the then federal Liberal government. All the Albanese government and Rob Mitchell have done is delay the project by over a year by placing the Liberals' \$50 million contribution into a review of infrastructure projects.

We all know that Labor's promise of \$130 million at the election towards the Watson Street interchange was a lie. It was only after the election that we found out in these documents that it was inclusive of the Liberals' \$50 million contribution. They penny-pinched it back to \$80 million. Ms Kathage and Ros Spence need to be straight with the community about whether there is also funding to upgrade Watson Street as part of the interchange. There is a lot of chatter in the community about this. The state government are setting compulsory housing targets of over 300 per cent for Wallan, so without an upgrade to Watson Street this will leave Wallan residents stuck in traffic gridlock.

I have been out in the community with the federal Liberal candidate for McEwen Jason McClintock, a genuine fighter for the community and for McEwen residents. I repeat my action, which is to seek an update from the minister on when Wallan residents can expect this project to be completed and if Watson Street is included in the upgrade.

Responses

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (19:13): There were 14 adjournment matters raised this evening, all of which will be referred to the relevant ministers.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The house will now adjourn.

House adjourned 7:13 pm.