

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Wednesday 7 June 2023

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell



**WITNESSES**

Mr Anthony Carbines MP, Minister for Racing,

Ms Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Mr Bill Kyriakopoulos, Deputy Secretary, Police, Racing, Victims and Coordination, and

Ms Lisa Saxton, Director, Office of Racing, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Racing the Honourable Anthony Carbines and officers from the Department of Justice and Community Safety. Minister, I will invite you to make a very short presentation or statement, no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

**Visual presentation.**

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks very much, Chair. Victoria is one of the world's premier racing jurisdictions, and the 2022 *Size and Scope of the Victorian Racing Industry* report prepared by consultancy IER found that the industry contributes almost \$4.7 billion annually to the Victorian economy and supports some 34 900 full-time equivalent jobs. More than 52 per cent of this economic contribution occurs in regional areas of the state, and there are more than 147,000 direct participants and employees in the industry, including breeders, trainers, owners, stable and kennel staff, jockeys, drivers and the staff and volunteers that work at the 127 racing clubs and 108 racetracks across the state. It is also important to remember that the industry's contribution to Victoria is not just an economic and employment contribution. Each of those 127 clubs and 108 racetracks across the state play a really engaging role with their local communities, whether it is through local sporting clubs, fundraising by helping out at race meetings or making club facilities available to community groups or as emergency relief centres.

As part of the 2023–24 Victorian budget process the government is providing some \$87 million over four years through the Backing Jobs in Victorian Racing initiative. This funding will support the continuation of the Victorian Racing Industry Fund and establish a new Major Racing Events Fund that will provide grants to support racing clubs and industry bodies to improve racing infrastructure and club facilities and help attract patrons to race meetings. The Victorian Racing Industry Fund will also continue to support projects to enhance animal welfare and initiatives to support the wellbeing of industry participants. The Major Racing Events Fund is targeted at increasing economic benefits to the state and the racing industry. It does that by promoting the development of existing events and the acquisition of new events, showcasing premium Victorian racing and building on Victoria's reputation as an events destination.

The 2023–24 budget provides \$355.9 million over the forward estimates, which also highlights the government's commitment to ensuring a sustainable racing industry that continues to generate jobs and economic activity across the state. That will be achieved by lifting the amount of net wagering revenue that is returned to the Victorian racing industry from 3.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent from 1 July 2024 and increasing the rate of wagering and betting tax from 10 per cent to 15 per cent. That will align Victoria with the rate that

applies in New South Wales and most other states and territories. It also maintains an important link between revenue generated from wagering and ensuring the racing industry is properly funded when the current wagering licence arrangements end in August next year. That will enable the industry to continue to deliver the economic and employment contribution I touched on earlier, and it makes a huge contribution to the state. It also safeguards the quality of racing product, including from an integrity and animal welfare perspective. The balance of revenue from the tax will continue to be distributed to the Hospitals and Charities Fund.

A continued focus on the welfare of both the racing animals and participants is critical. The government will continue to partner with racing codes to ensure that there is maintained a focus on improving the welfare standards and animal welfare in particular, and the government will continue to work with the racing codes to support employment and skills developed within the industry.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the racing industry more generally. Our clubs across the state are made up of so very many volunteer committees, and in some ways some are big small businesses, if you like. There is a bit of pressure when you are a local in the town or the city when you can travel right across the state to picnic races or ongoing commitments to significant racing that provides employment and economic activity. I was at the Warrnambool carnival not long ago. Independent reports there indicated it is something like \$15 million in economic activity in the South-West Coast alone that is generated through, particularly over a three-day carnival, having 15,000 people there on the last day and on those other days. And that is whether you are stopping on the way through other towns – everybody gets to clip the ticket of people from Melbourne and around the state who are part of those events. And there are so many businesses and so many people who absolutely count and rely on those activities for their revenue and to run their businesses successfully, and it all comes down to, in many cases, the volunteers that run these clubs in communities right across the state, and I thank them.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Mr O'Brien, I am going to hand to you for the next 8 minutes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. You mentioned the VRIF in your presentation, and it is in the budget papers as well. More than 12 months ago your government provided funding through VRIF for the creation of an undercover 1400-metre wood fibre track at Ballarat Turf Club. The Ballarat works are now coming to a standstill over some cultural heritage issues. There is a danger that the club may very soon not be able to cater for the increasing number of thoroughbreds coming to Ballarat after the closure of Caulfield for training. Are you aware of this issue, and what is being done to resolve it?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Sure. Thanks, Mr O'Brien. The Ballarat Turf Club and Racing Victoria are working through the necessary permits at the moment and the approvals to construct the uphill woodchip training track. The club and the government both recognise the importance of providing an appropriate protection for critical Aboriginal cultural heritage throughout Victoria. We are also aware of how important the project is for the club. There are some 800 horses trained at Ballarat, up from 500 five years ago. The number of trainers based at Ballarat has also increased from 45 to 72 in the same period, and the turf club really do need to be congratulated. They have been proactive, and they have positioned themselves well as a key training location in western Victoria. I am sure the club would agree it has been well supported by Racing Victoria and the government. I was in Ballarat last month. We announced \$3.1 million from the Andrews government to deliver 200 jobs on behalf of Minister Carroll and the racing sector.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry, Minister, can we get back to the issue of the track?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Yes, absolutely. And so I understand the club will meet with traditional owners next week to discuss the club's cultural heritage management plan, and I certainly would not want to get ahead of that process. It needs to happen independently. Also, though, we would not want to see the commitment to training or racing in Ballarat questioned, given the support we have provided through the VRIF, the Victorian Racing Industry Fund – \$72 million over four years. So let us just check again – the uphill track, Ballarat Turf Club – the Victorian Racing Industry Fund provided \$519,000 to support this important project. The funding contribution was: VRIF half a million and Racing Victoria \$3.8 million, for a total project cost of \$4.3 million.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Minister. Do you have a plan B if it is not completed and we literally cannot accommodate the trainers at Ballarat?

**Anthony CARBINES:** There is no doubt that trainers are flocking to Ballarat. As I said, the trainer numbers are up from 45 to 72, and I would not want to pre-empt the work that is going to be done on that cultural management plan and the conversation the club is having over the next week. My conversation with the club is they are – what is the word – not quietly confident, but they are very respectful of this process and working through it.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Of course, but they are rather anxious, I believe.

**Anthony CARBINES:** But it does get back to – Yes, absolutely. There are, but they are being worked through. When the VRIF, our racing industry fund, has provided something like \$7 million in projects at Ballarat Turf Club over the time we have been in office and leveraged up to \$19 million in infrastructure projects at Ballarat, that has been really significant. Uphill track –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Is there a backup plan, Minister? That was the question.

**Anthony CARBINES:** The backup plan is the same as the current plan and the process that is going to be worked through on those cultural management plans, which is that we work together and we respect our First Nations people on those processes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay, thank you.

**Anthony CARBINES:** And the club has got it in hand and the money is there, and we are confident that the project will be delivered in partnership with First Nations people and that project.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Minister. You mentioned in your presentation both the uplift in the point-of-consumption tax and the new wagering funding arrangements. You issued a media release about these on 2 May in which you indicated the new funding framework was supported by an MOU between the industry and government. Did you sign the MOU with the industry?

**Anthony CARBINES:** The industry agreement – I would have to dig it out. But really it was an MOU signed – I am pretty sure I did, actually. I would have to dig it out. It is an MOU between the government and the racing industry, and all racing codes did sign the agreement. I have not got it in front of me, but I am pretty sure I did.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But was it you? Was it the Treasurer?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Yes, I reckon I did.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You think you did?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Yes, I am sure that I did.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The future of the funding of the racing industry, and you are not quite sure whether you signed the MOU.

**Anthony CARBINES:** No, I am sure that I did.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You are sure you did now?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Yes, I did.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** All right, good. What is in it, then?

**Anthony CARBINES:** I sign a lot of things.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I would have thought this one would be fairly high priority given the angst it has caused over the last six months or so. But thank you. Can you tell me what is in the MOU?

**Anthony CARBINES:** I have got to just conclude that the government – I had no problem – was always going to sign the agreement. It was always doing the work to make sure the industry was satisfied that when you remove a 'no less favourable' clause from law they feel the agreement that the government is making on

funding is one that they accept. They have all signed up to that, and I appreciate the bipartisan support that we have had through the Parliament to remove the ‘no less favourable’ clause from legislation and see the agreement concluded. I am pretty sure I have probably got it up on the wall in the office. It is a good bit of work.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** You have got a copy of what on the wall in the office, the MOU?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Yes.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Okay. Can the Parliament and the committee have of a copy of it, then?

**Anthony CARBINES:** I do not see that there is any reason why the MOU cannot be made available, and I understand you have also asked that, I think, of me in the Parliament. I am certainly happy to take any advice as to why it cannot be and provide that on the basis that there are no other impediments to that.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Okay, excellent. That would be great. I will take it that the minister is going to get it to us. Thank you. I am a little bit shocked.

*Members interjecting.*

**Danny O’BRIEN:** On the point-of-consumption tax, what commitment can you give as racing minister that it will not –

**Anthony CARBINES:** Sorry, that first bit – sorry, Mr O’Brien.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** On the point-of-consumption tax –

**Anthony CARBINES:** Yes.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** what commitment can you give as racing minister that it will not be increased again or that the 50–50 share with the industry will change?

**Anthony CARBINES:** I think there was a very important principle that when the point-of-consumption tax moved through the legislation to 15 per cent from 10 per cent, we also moved the industry’s receipts from 3.5 per cent up to an additional 4 to 7.5 per cent. That is the important principle for any POCT – the racing industry is getting 50 per cent of that. Decisions as to whether the POCT in the future will ever change is a matter for the Treasurer, but what was critical here was that we brought our POCT into line with like jurisdictions like New South Wales. Also, it was part of the mechanism to make sure that the racing industry felt it could sign up to an agreement that could remove ‘no less favourable’ from legislation and say, ‘We believe this is fair and reasonable.’ What is also fair and reasonable is that a tax that is generated on the success and the revenue raised in the industry funds and goes back to the industry. What is most likely, I would hope, in the work that we are doing with the racing industry is if they work hard – and they do – and they are successful, then their share of the value of that 15 per cent POCT and the 7.5 per cent that we have agreed to provide to them will grow. Actually the revenue will grow that they will receive. So there is a good incentive for them to continue to run what is the most pre-eminent racing jurisdiction in the country.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Obviously the question is premised on the fact that the Queensland point-of-consumption tax is much higher, so there is a concern, a question – anyway.

**Anthony CARBINES:** And they have copped a bit of flak for that.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Noting there is a little over a year to go on the current wagering licence until the new arrangements come into place, how are you protecting the industry from any shortfalls arising from the transition to a new licence arrangement?

**Anthony CARBINES:** There are a couple of elements; one is on the new licence arrangement. I believe Minister Horne must be here on Wednesday next week – I know that she is coming – and she obviously has, as you are well aware in your shadow roles as well, the licence process. I am at arms-length from that, and that is overseen by the minister for gaming. That is why it has been critical to make sure the MOU –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Is there a commitment to the previous level of the funding to the industry?

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mr O'Brien, your time is up.

**Anthony CARBINES:** That is why we have got the MOU and the funding arrangement with the racing codes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I look forward to reading it. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, gentlemen.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry.

**The CHAIR:** We are moving on to Ms Kathage, who has the next 11 minutes.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair. I also want to discuss the point-of-consumption tax in reference to budget paper 3, page 90, but I would just like to go back a step and ask if the minister can please explain the increase in the point-of-consumption tax and why it was important for the Victorian racing industry.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks, Ms Kathage. The Victorian racing industry contributes, as I said earlier, I think some \$4.7 billion to the economy here in Victoria and 34,900 full-time equivalent jobs. So the racing industry also supports both community recreation and cohesion with more than 86,000 active racing club members and some 92,000 racing industry participants.

So when the TAB was privatised back in 1994 the government required the holder of the wagering and betting licence to enter into funding arrangements with the racing industry in recognition of the industry's very significant contribution to the value of that licence. At the time there was of course no online or fixed-odds wagering – if you can remember back; I can – and the licence conferred an effective monopoly right to operate tote betting and a retail network of betting agencies throughout the state. There was some betting on football, but racing comprised the majority of the activity. In order to protect racing industry revenues, which are the basis of the industry's significant contribution to jobs and the state's economy, the *Gambling Regulation Act* required subsequent licence-holders to enter arrangements with the racing industry that were no less favourable than those previously in place.

The Australian wagering market has changed. It is a very different place than it was back in the mid-90s or even in 2012 when the current licence commenced. So in 2023, particularly in the post-pandemic world, the market is characterised by fierce competition for online customers, the dominance of fixed-odds betting and of course betting on sports, as well as more traditional racing products but also other sports. So the requirement for a licence-holder to enter 'no less favourable' funding arrangements with the racing industry has been removed, as colleagues on the committee would be aware, in response to the changed market conditions. And while that was essential for the minister for gaming to be able to award a licence to remove that 'no less favourable' clause, it also had the potential to cause a \$200 million per annum loss of funding to the racing industry here in our state. That is why the commitment that the VRI would be funded through wagering and betting receipts has a very long history.

It is also important to remember that the industry remains a major generator of these receipts in the first place, contributing hundreds of millions of dollars annually for prize money, integrity and administrative services and infrastructure to run the races that generate the revenue. It does not just happen. Increasing the point-of-consumption tax rate from 10 to 15 per cent of net wagering revenue and returning 7.5 per cent of net wagering revenue to the VRI will enable the government to continue this commitment when the current wagering and betting licence expires in August next year.

It will also bring Victoria into line with other jurisdictions. All states and territories have a 15 per cent point-of-consumption tax, other than Queensland, as Mr O'Brien touched on, where the rate is 20 per cent. While the racing industry funding arrangements are complex and vary from state to state, most racing industries receive a fixed portion of their state's point-of-consumption receipts. So for example, in Queensland 80 per cent of the tax goes to the racing industry. The New South Wales industry share is 33 per cent. The New South Wales industry of course does enjoy some other tax advantages related to wagering licences in that state. And my

colleagues are familiar with the arrangements here in Victoria in bringing some proportionality back to that 7.5 per cent of our 15 per cent POCT rate outlined in the budget.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. Earlier on the same page – that is, page 90 of BP3 – we have the initiative ‘Backing jobs in Victorian racing’. Can you explain please how this will improve animal welfare in the Victorian racing industry?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks, Ms Kathage. The ‘Backing jobs in Victorian racing’ initiative includes two major programs: the Victorian Racing Industry Fund and the Major Racing Events Fund. The VRIF has a longstanding program providing some \$72 million over four years to the racing clubs and controlling bodies to improve racing and training infrastructure with a focus on participant safety and animal welfare and also to promote event attendance, improve customer community facilities and promote the Victorian breeding industry and sales industry. So the MREF is a new program that we have announced through this budget, and it was an election commitment to support racing clubs and controlling bodies to grow existing events and create some new opportunities to cement our position here in Victoria as a major events capital in the country.

There are a number of examples of VRIF grants that improve animal welfare in the Victorian racing industry. Like I said, last month we signed off a \$2 million contribution from the VRIF towards a \$4.6 million project to establish an equine veterinary hospital at Cranbourne training centre. The Member for Cranbourne is well across those projects, and her advocacy has been critical in her community. As she is well aware, she has many participants of the racing industry living in her electorate. It is an initiative of the Cranbourne Turf Club, supported by Racing Victoria, and it will deliver a state-of-the-art veterinary facility – a vet hospital – right on the doorstep of Victoria’s biggest thoroughbred training centre. That is the significance out there at Cranbourne; it is the type of project the fund was established to deliver. There are currently some 1200 horses trained at Cranbourne every day. Long before dawn hundreds of hardworking Victorians get up to feed and walk these horses, to swim them, to gallop them, to make sure they are as happy and well looked after as they can be. But it is also why our government wants to continue to back improvements to training and racing infrastructure. We use the VRIF to do that. Safety and welfare of horses remains at the heart of the program; this is a very good example of that. And given the concentration of horses trained at Cranbourne and also nearby at Pakenham and Mornington, it is vital that there are premium-quality, specialist equine veterinary services available out in the south-east.

Those specialist services are currently located now at Werribee and at Ballarat, but this investment will make sure that trainers in the south-east also have access to services without having to travel or float their horses, that may well be sick or injured, long distances to the other side of town. In addition to providing access to specialist veterinary care for 130 licensed trainers and some 1200 horses based at Cranny, as well as the 800 horses at Mornington and Pakenham, the new facility will also ensure immediate emergency care is available when it is required.

Most importantly the new facility will be home to some of the most advanced diagnostic imaging technology in the world. About this time last year my predecessor approved a grant of nearly \$1 million from the VRIF to enable Racing Victoria to purchase new CT and PET scanners to improve the detection of prefracture pathology in horses. That technology can identify horses at increased risk of injury and enable trainers and vets to manage training and racing loads to prevent limb injuries, which as we know can have dire consequences for large animals like horses. The purchase of this technology builds on the work of the equine limb injury prevention program, another initiative of the VRIF in partnership with Melbourne University and Racing Victoria, which has made a significant contribution to the global scientific understanding of limb injuries in horses with a view to early identification of risk factors and prevention of injury. The equine limb injury prevention program is an \$11.4 million project in total, with the VRIF contributing something like \$4.95 million. That new scanning technology will be located at the Cranbourne facility. It will enable the industry to continue to ensure that no stone is left unturned when it comes to looking after the stars of the show. We have seen that in relation to the Melbourne Cup. This is about taking this more broadly and providing it in those centres around the state where we have got very significant horse racing industries.

So the new vet hospital at Cranny is just one example of how the VRIF supports better animal welfare in the racing industry, and since the government came to office we have provided something like \$14.6 million through the VRIF to support 38 animal welfare projects. We will make sure we continue to back strong animal welfare in the Victorian racing industry.



**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. And regional communities, such as at the top of my electorate – racing is very important for us, especially the local Kilmore club. We love to go there as a family for a dinner; it is a great spot. But do you have examples of how the Victorian Racing Industry Fund has supported regional racing clubs and their communities?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Thanks, Ms Kathage. Yes, I have been out to the Kilmore track, and they do a great job out there. It is a real workhorse, if you like, track for trainers and also for meetings throughout the year. But in regional Victoria alone the racing industry generates \$1.17 billion in economic activity and 9000 full-time jobs – in regional Victoria. 650 community and not-for-profit organisations share racing club facilities in Victoria; 1200 charitable organisations are supported by the racing industry; nearly a third of Victorian racing clubs have partnerships in place with educational institutions; and 80 per cent of race clubs hire out on-course facilities for private or corporate use – so critical in regional Victoria are these satellites of racetracks and clubs right across the state. The Raceday Attraction program through VRIF is another really important but small program to support racing clubs, assist in event promotion and delivery and bring more people to the races, and many clubs have used the RAP to raise funds in those needy communities. This year the RAP provided \$8000 to support the Pink Roses Race Day at Stony Creek, aiming to attract more women and families to the races as well as raising money for oncology services at Leongatha Hospital. Now that we have renewed the VRIF for another four years we will work with industry to see what else we can do, but we do know that it is critical to provide that race day attraction program, particularly for our picnic races.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. I am going to hand over to Ms Sandell for the last session.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, in this Victorian budget the racing industry will get an extra \$120 million per year. That is more than four times the funding that homelessness and housing services are getting. I mean, budgets are about priorities. Minister, do you really think this is reasonable?

**Anthony CARBINES:** The budget is about priorities, and what is really important, Ms Sandell, is to make sure that the racing industry is resourced – not from money that should be going to other critical social services in the community, but the racing industry has an obligation, and the government has seen fit here to make sure that it is funding itself, in a way. The taxes on the racing industry fund the racing industry –

**Ellen SANDELL:** That money could go to homelessness services. There is nothing preventing you from doing that.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Well, the people who look to have support services either through housing or other social services also need a job, and 35,000 of them have a job in the racing industry – a full-time job –

**Ellen SANDELL:** But four times the amount of funding seems excessive.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Yes, but we do not have the tax receipts from the racing industry unless there is an industry, and to have an industry we employ 35,000 people across the state –

**Ellen SANDELL:** Where will those people live? We are in a housing crisis.

**Anthony CARBINES:** Well, how would they pay their rent if they did not have a job? But they have a job in the racing industry.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Well, then, just on jobs, Minister –

**Anthony CARBINES:** There are 35,000 of them. They are great people, they do a great job, and the tax on the racing industry through the POCT funds the racing industry. The harder they work and the more successful they are, the more they can protect those jobs. We resource the racing industry through a tax on the industry, and that is fair and appropriate, as well as other funding going into the Hospitals and Charities Fund.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Minister, you talk about jobs. This racing industry will go from getting 3.5 per cent of net wagering revenue to 7.5 per cent, so they are now getting more than double. We are told this is a jobs initiative. Are you really expecting jobs to more than double in the racing industry?

**Anthony CARBINES:** This is about making sure in moving the point-of-consumption tax by 4 per cent –

**Ellen SANDELL:** So are there going to be double the amount of jobs, or the racing industry just gets double the amount of money?

**Anthony CARBINES:** No, but if you have a new licensing agreement then you need to find a new revenue source to support the industry, and we are doing that by raising the tax on the industry from 10 per cent to 15 per cent and then also saying to the industry, ‘You will get a more equivalent share of that funding’, so that that protects the jobs –

**Ellen SANDELL:** They are getting more than double –

**Anthony CARBINES:** The decision the government is making is to ensure that the tax on the industry, when you lose that licensing revenue, secures and sustains those 35,000 full-time jobs across the state. Otherwise we would be in a position where we were not providing the ongoing funding and support – the no-less-favourable arrangements that we have just talked about that have had bipartisan support in the Parliament.

**Ellen SANDELL:** It does not have tripartisan support, that is for sure. What reporting requirements are on the racing industry for these public funds that they are being given?

**Anthony CARBINES:** Well, Racing Victoria – they are really matters for Racing Victoria and the codes. They have many obligations on them.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Minister. The time has expired. As much as I regret to cut you off, that is the last of the questions for this session.

Minister and department officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee’s request.

The committee is now going to take a short break before beginning consideration of the portfolio of housing at 3:05 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**