



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 13 November 2024

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Georgie Crozier

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

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

¹ Resigned 7 December 2023

² Lib until 27 March 2023

³ Appointed 14 November 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 July 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 November 2024

⁶ Appointed 7 February 2024

Party abbreviations

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

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

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

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

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Wednesday 13 November 2024

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 9:33 am, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.

*Petitions***Short-stay accommodation***Response*

The Clerk: I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: Treasurer's response to petition titled 'Oppose the Short Stay Levy Bill 2024', tabled by Mr Limbrick.

*Business of the house***Notices**

Notices of motion given.

*Motions***Middle East conflict**

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:44): 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) the UN human rights office has condemned the Israeli military for their 'mass arrests, ill-treatment, and gratuitous humiliation of Palestinians during raids in refugee camps and towns across the West Bank';
 - (b) over the last month the same office has gathered information showing a 'pattern of unnecessary, disproportionate and otherwise unlawful force used in Palestinian communities of Madama, Dura, and Al Fawwar refugee camps, among others';
 - (c) it has been reported that during one of these raids, people were beaten, handcuffed, blindfolded and kept without food and water for periods of 5 to 19 hours;
 - (d) at another raid it was reported that Palestinian people were detained, had numbers written on their forehead, blindfolded, handcuffed and forced to walk through town;
 - (e) Jeremy Laurence from UN Rights Watch has stated that 'justice must be served with respect to the grave violations of international law that have been committed';
- (2) does not support the state of Israel's continued invasion of Gaza;
- (3) supports calls for an immediate and permanent ceasefire; and
- (4) calls on the Victorian government to advocate to the Australian federal government that it end its support for the state of Israel's invasion of Gaza.

Leave refused.

*Members statements***Life Saving Victoria**

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:45): Many of us here will know that the amazing team from Life Saving Victoria are visiting Parliament today to discuss their water safety initiatives that keep Victorians safe by the water. Life Saving Victoria are also at the front of my mind this week as I represented the Minister for Emergency Services at Life Saving Victoria's Flags Up event last Thursday. Speaking alongside Catherine Greaves, the CEO of LSV, and John Felton, the assistant commissioner and chief of staff at Emergency Management Victoria, I was proud to represent the

government as we marked the beginning of the lifesaving patrol season and thanked LSV's 44,900 members, which includes 8800 patrolling members. I was particularly proud to be representing a government that is investing \$9.11 million in funding over two years for LSV to continue its critical water safety programs, including paid and volunteer lifeguard services across up to 42 locations; rescue watercraft services comprising up to nine roving rescue jetski crews, in pairs, at targeted high-risk coastal and bay areas; rescue helicopters and drone observation and critical response services; and of course public information relations and messaging. Thanks to this government's support and the tireless efforts of LSV members, it is safe to say Victorians are in excellent hands as we head into summer. I will finish up by reminding Victorians, as always, to please swim between the flags.

United States election

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:47): The election of Donald J Trump provides much food for thought. We saw a campaign driven by misogyny, xenophobia and hate. We heard of a return to US-style isolationism. We heard bizarre economic proposals that will serve only the wealthy at the expense of the working poor and the most marginalised citizens of the US. But we cannot ignore the enormity of Trump's decisive victory, signalling a broad shift of support across the American working and middle classes. We can point to Trump's mastery of misinformation or the populist fantasies that characterised his election campaign, but the reality is that more than 51 per cent of Americans rejected the Democrats' vision in favour of Trump's. And it is not just an American thing. We are seeing a seismic shift towards adoptions of similar policies by right-wing populist parties all over the Western world. Here in Australia millions are struggling to stay afloat. Meagre wages growth, high interest rates, unaffordable and scarce housing and unchecked retail duopolies pushing up food costs make any change, however fanciful, look increasingly attractive. It is time for vision. It is time for bold changes, however modest, that improve daily life. How about a decent bus service so we do not have to run an extra car? Or some cost-of-living relief that will cost the Treasurer nothing – let us grow our own weed.

Blue Mackerel offshore wind project

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:48): I rise to update the house on the economic opportunities developing in the Gippsland region in offshore wind. Last week I joined the team from Blue Mackerel project at Port Anthony in South Gippsland to launch their geotechnical survey vessel as part of their preparations for the 1-gigawatt project. On the way to Port Anthony I joined locals for dinner at the pub in Leongatha and heard the excitement around the opportunities coming in offshore wind – well-paid jobs and developing supply chains for local businesses, all backed by billions in investment on the table right now, which is a direct result of the leadership and action this Labor government has taken to decarbonise our economy. Port Anthony is ready to service this industry, which will power our hospitals, homes and businesses with zero-emissions electricity and provide generations of well-paid ongoing jobs.

Manna Gum Community House

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:49): Today in Foster from 3 to 6 pm at Manna Gum Community House there will be one of the Gippsland offshore wind days, with all current project developers ready to speak with the community together. I dropped in to Manna Gum Community House to see manager Rebecca Matthews and congratulate her and the local volunteers at the house on their win in the 2024 Victoria Learn Local awards. Manna Gum picked up the win for the Victorian Learn Local Pre-accredited Program Award in the small providers category. Manna Gum Community House helps people get into training and find jobs.

Toora Primary School

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:50): Another visit I was pleased to make, which also happened to be along the incredible and recently extended Great Southern Rail Trail connecting these beautiful towns, was to Toora Primary School, which last week received \$119,000 through the planned

maintenance fund. Toora is a beautiful little school whose numbers have been steadily growing. They are also excited about the opportunities for the growth from offshore wind.

Greyhound racing

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (09:50): The United States now only has two operational greyhound racing tracks. The UK has 23, Ireland has 15 and New Zealand has six. Everywhere that we look, dog racing is coming to an end. Yet Australia has a whopping 64 tracks across the country, the most of anywhere in the world, that still allow dogs to be killed in the pursuit of gambling profits. Despite skyrocketing track deaths and injuries, it seems that Greyhound Racing Victoria believes they simply must kill and injure more dogs, with a planning application recently lodged for a new track in Kilmany. They are calling it part of the strategic plan, but with the release of their annual report last week, which showed that they are killing more dogs, injuring more dogs, rehoming less dogs in a rehoming crisis and are rapidly losing money to the point they are relying on advanced support payments from the government, we know and they know they should just get a grip and give up already. If approved, the Kilmany track will kill many dogs. That is why the greyhound community, the Animal Justice Party and I will do everything we possibly can to ensure that it does not proceed, because greyhounds are for winning hearts, not races.

Maternal and child health services

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:52): ‘Life-saving’, ‘brilliant’, ‘thorough’, ‘reassuring’, ‘lost without it’ – these are the words of some of the parents in Southern Metro, about their local maternal and child health services, who participated in my recent children’s round table held at the Caulfield South Community House. The birth of a child can obviously be a very uncertain time – exciting but uncertain – especially for many first-time parents, and for more than a century maternal and child health services have provided help, assistance and support for new parents until their children go to school. Monitoring growth and helping with feeding and sleeping, the parents at the round table told me that the service is an absolute treasure in the range of services the state government provides to children. I have made the point of visiting several of the maternal and child health services in Southern Metro, including the excellent North Brighton service that was recently upgraded by the state Labor government. Across the board the Labor government has invested more than \$28 million over three years in the last budget to boost maternal and child health in Victoria and meet growing demand. I want to thank all of the exceptional maternal and child health nurses that work across the state who provide so much support to new parents, and I want to thank everyone who participated in the children’s round table – it was a great discussion.

Voluntary assisted dying

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:53): Last fortnight I had the opportunity to attend the second voluntary assisted dying (VAD) conference hosted by Go Gentle in Brisbane. It was wonderful to join advocates, doctors, nurses, palliative care specialists and policymakers at what was a rich and thought-provoking conference. It is incredible to reflect on just how far we have come, with voluntary assisted dying now legal in every state and territory apart from the Northern Territory and having provided many people with a terminal illness and their families choice and dignity at end of life. The conference took the key challenges from across the jurisdictions head-on. In Victoria in particular there are significant barriers in our existing laws preventing access and there were many calls throughout the conference for these to be addressed. We heard from expert panels discussing the tension that exists in some areas of service provision and celebrating the achievements of partnerships and truly patient-centred work in others. We also heard the moving personal story of Laury Colgan, and I want to thank Laury for the grace with which she shared her late husband’s VAD experience with the audience. Her story will be an enduring reminder for the work that is still to be done to ensure that people in Victoria and all over the country can access a dignified death.

V/Line services

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (09:54): The new VLocity trains arrived at Warrnambool station on 1 December and were greeted by quite the crowd – I will correct that, it was 1 November; there is a timetable change on 1 December. Many patrons were excited to mark the occasion and enjoyed checking out the train before its return to Melbourne 2 hours later. Two carriages were particularly special to the All Abilities Advocacy group – they were so pleased and proud that their travel has been vastly facilitated with excellent access ramps, seamlessly opening doors to six spaces available to them and, so importantly, an accessible toilet. I sincerely thank them for their years of passionate advocacy, and I thank Minister Williams and her team for directing the work, and predecessor ministers as well. There were fresh sandwiches and food available at the station thanks to our advocacy, and from 1 December an additional return service on Saturday and Sunday, which is also very exciting. My thanks to the V/Line staff who made the occasion special, answering many questions about the upgrading of the service and providing fun V/Line show bags for everyone.

CleftPals Victoria

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (09:56): Cleft Awareness Week runs from 8 to 14 November. The Cleft Palate & Lip Society, CleftPals, exists to support kids with clefts and their families. CleftPals provides life-changing advice and support for kids born with cleft palates and cleft lips and for their families too, who are often hurting and confused. Last weekend CleftPals Victoria celebrated their 50th anniversary, so congratulations to them and a big thankyou to CleftPals from all of us here at Parliament. A cleft lip and/or palate is the most common craniofacial abnormality, affecting one in 700 babies. Clefts can vary from a small notch in the lip to a complete separation of the lip, nose and upper palate. Clefts can be on one side or both sides of the lip. My husband was one of those babies, and for severity his clefts were rated as seven out of 10. His parents were told he would never be able to talk and told by others that it would have been better for him to have been aborted.

Having a child born with a cleft lip or palate can be very confronting and frightening for parents. A child with a cleft will require numerous rounds of plastic surgery and often extensive orthodontal care and bone grafts. Kids with clefts also experience high rates of inner ear infections and often require speech therapy. As they grow up into tweens and teenagers many experience mental health issues from looking and sounding different from their peers, and they need psychological support. Life for kids born with clefts, and their parents, is tough. Amazing groups like CleftPals, who supported my husband and his family from the moment of his birth right up until his last surgeries as a 21-year-old, when we were in our on-and-off-again engagement phase, meant that he thrived and he succeeded, and now I am benefiting from all that care in that I have a wonderful husband and my children have a wonderful father.

Sewa Diwali

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:58): I want to take this opportunity to thank the more than 300 people who donated over 6000 kilos of essential goods in the first Victorian Sewa Diwali food drive. Sewa Diwali is a grassroots initiative that centres on the practice of sewa, or selfless giving. It unites communities in a shared mission to bring light, hope and sustenance to those in need during the Diwali season. This year marks the first time this food drive has occurred here in Victoria, organised by the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh with the support of over 30 volunteer coordinators and a contribution of 20 partner organisations, and what a massive success it was. Across 25 collection points over 300 people contributed an astounding 6000 kilograms – that is 6 tonnes – of essential goods for those in need. What is more remarkable is the expected 3 tonnes in donations was doubled, demonstrating an exceptional and amazing effort, particularly for a first-time initiative.

I had the pleasure of attending Yarraville Foodbank to witness the culmination of this generous effort. I watched as car after car arrived, each filled to the brim with donations of food and essentials that would support families across Victoria. It was a terrific day and powerful reminder of the strength and kindness in our community. Special thanks to Foodbank Australia for supporting this wonderful

initiative and my heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed – the donors, volunteers and all of the temples and organisations. Together you have brought hope and light to many Victorians this Diwali. The work here in Victoria contributes to the national total of more than 25 tonnes collected across Australia, a testament to the collective compassion, dedication and unity of our communities nationwide in the spirit of the Diwali. I look forward to supporting the Sewa Diwali initiative to grow and to assisting them even more in coming years throughout Victoria and across the nation.

Production of documents

Dingo protection

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (10:00): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes:
 - (a) that dingoes are protected threatened wildlife under the Wildlife Act 1975 and are listed as ‘vulnerable’ on the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 threatened list;
 - (b) since 2018, the unprotection order in council has allowed for the lethal control of dingoes to livestock on private land and within a 3-kilometre buffer zone along the boundaries of public land in eastern Victoria;
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within 10 weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, all documents relating to the dingo order in council, including but not limited to:
 - (a) consultation or consultation reports in relation to decision-making, including with traditional owners;
 - (b) reports from each review of the dingo listings under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 in consultation with the Scientific Advisory Committee;
 - (c) genetic health, population-modelling trends and counts for each year, including all information and data that informed relevant numbers;
 - (d) assessment of the impact of floods, fires, road strike, development and urban sprawl and any other matters that may affect populations;
 - (e) the reasoning for the decision to:
 - (i) protect dingoes in Victoria’s north-west;
 - (ii) renew the order in council announced on 24 September 2024;
 - (iii) end the wild dog bounty program;
 - (f) compliance with conditions, restrictions and limitations in the order in council, including the number of reports and investigations of alleged illegal killing;
 - (g) the number of dingoes killed using large leg-hold traps, confinement traps, net traps, poison baits, and firearms; and
 - (h) the cost to the government to operate the program.

Dingoes are being killed en masse in Victoria through horrifically cruel methods such as poison baiting, shooting, trapping and up until June this year bounty programs. Despite overwhelming evidence not to do so, a few months ago the government decided to extend the order in council that unprotects them across most parts of the state. Conservationists and ecologists now believe that the status of dingoes is in between ‘threatened’ and ‘critically endangered’, with extinction on the horizon. And yet the government has provided no real reasoning and no documentation to justify their cruelty. Once again there is no transparency in the massacre of wildlife in our state.

We know that the government is not acting on expert advice or information, because up until a few months ago dingoes were also included in the wild dog bounty program. The National First Nations’ Dingo Declaration last year was signed by more than 20 traditional owner groups calling for an end to

the culling, declaring how dingoes are a cultural icon representing a vital connection to country through companionship, hunting partnerships, totems, Dreaming and customs. It reads:

When you remove Dingoes, Country gets sick, we get sick.

And finally:

Killing Dingoes is killing family.

Killing dingoes is symbolic of our shameful history of colonisation. It is wiping out native species and eradicating even more customs and totems from our First Nations people. But there has been small progress. Following the incredible work of the Wotjobaluk people and Defend the Wild, the government did not renew the dingo unprotection order in north-west Victoria this year. The government stated that:

... this decision follows new research, strong advice and the effectiveness of non-lethal dingo control methods to protect livestock.

I find it fascinating myself – and I am sure others do – how the government only applied this knowledge to a section of Victoria. Somehow when you head further north, even a kilometre out of the zone, apparently this government thinks the cultural significance of dingoes must fade and nonlethal dingo control methods must suddenly stop working. Farmers are losing out on this decision as well, because those in the north west will benefit from the \$550,000 investment to adopt effective nonlethal control methods, yet every other farmer in Victoria will be excluded from this initiative.

Ecologists and experts have been advising us for years of the vital role dingoes play as our only natural apex predator. These documents will reveal if there was any consideration of the essential role that dingoes play in Australia's biodiversity and keeping our ecosystem in balance or if they have considered the impact of floods, bushfires, urban development and road strikes on the population counts. These documents will reveal – or rather not reveal – how the government sought to justify the continuation of the non-protection order for the rest of the state. If they insist on maiming and killing yet another of our native species, the public deserve to know why. I commend the motion to the house.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:03): I rise to speak on Ms Purcell's documents motion in relation to dingoes and the unprotection order and the request from the house that the Leader of the Government produce a series of documents relating to the decision-making with respect to the dingo order, including reports from the Scientific Advisory Committee; traditional owner consultation; modelling and trends; assessment of floods, fires, road strikes, development, urban sprawl and matters that may affect population; various elements of the reasoning for the decisions set out in part (2)(e); and then compliance and a range of other matters relating to dingo deaths. As is our practice, the government will not oppose today's documents motion. The motion, should it pass, will be considered by the government in accordance with its standard practice and subject to consideration of various issues of privilege.

On the broader questions, I think it is clear that this is an issue which obviously many in the community have clear views about. The government has invested an additional \$2 million into nonlethal dingo controls and population research. We have held various and numerous community consultations as part of a broader review into wild dog management across Victoria, and farmers have spoken about the impact that wild dog attacks have on stock and the impact that has on mauled but not dead livestock.

Recently the Minister for Environment and the Minister for Agriculture, ministers Dimopoulos and Spence, have announced a continuation of the dingo unprotection order in the north-east and east of Victoria, which permits control of dingoes on private land and along the boundaries of public land until 1 January 2028. Dingoes will continue to be protected in the north-west of the state, where the dingo population is critically low. Lethal controls will not be permitted on private or public land in the north-west. There is little evidence that dingoes are present in large numbers in these parts of Victoria.

The \$2 million investment in dingo monitoring and support in the north-west to adopt nonlethal dingo management strategies will help fund things like trials, research and on-the-ground advice on nonlethal management strategies that minimise the risk of livestock predation, building on the work that is already underway as part of the \$550,000 north-west vertebrate pest management program announced in March this year. The wild dog management program will be expanded to include extra support for farmers through targeted controls of a wider range of vertebrates, including deer, foxes, pigs and wild cats and, to reflect this expansion, will be renamed the vertebrate species management program. The wild dog component of the Victorian fox and wild dog bounty program will cease – the final opportunity to submit wild dog parts at Maffra was on 16 October – and the bounty for foxes will increase from \$10 to \$14 a scalp until 30 June 2025.

The remaking of the dingo unprotection order follows a review of dingo conservation and management with feedback from traditional owners, farmers and landholders, alongside scientific research. During the consultation for the review of the order, departmental staff met with and listened to traditional owners, farmers, environmental specialist groups and local communities. The feedback collected from the consultation process helped the government understand the impacts of the proposed new order, and that order obviously has now been made. Those consultation activities have also informed the design of a \$2 million support package that was announced at the same time as the new order.

Obviously we understand that there are a range of very clear views held across the community about these matters. The government will work with all interested parties and stakeholders to build a greater shared understanding of and perspectives on the issues. We know and we understand that there are clearly a lot of views – a range have been canvassed, taken into consideration – and we await further discussions.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (10:08): Whilst the Liberals and Nationals will not oppose the motion or the release of these documents, what I do question is the reason the Animal Justice Party want these documents and how they will use them. I also question the Animal Justice Party's understanding of the wild dog issue in Victoria.

Wild dogs in the north-east of Victoria are not dingoes. They are domestic dogs gone wild. They probably have interbred with dingoes and have some dingo genealogy, but make no mistake, they are domestic dogs gone wild. These are ruthless killers that kill and maim livestock and destroy farmers' livelihoods. If the Animal Justice Party took the time to go and sit with farmers in the north-east and talk to them, the farmers could tell them story after story of how the wild dogs have decimated their herds and left animals half-eaten – half-eaten and alive, some of them. These farmers will tell you stories of the impact on their own mental health of having to deal with the carnage that the wild dogs create amongst their livestock. They will tell you about animals ripped apart, animals ripped limb from limb and dying a dreadful death. They will tell you of animals who are maimed and mauled, who are walking around with their innards hanging out. This is not humane. These are ruthless killers. At least when a wild dog is shot by a farmer, it is killed humanely, but the dogs do not kill the livestock humanely.

The Animal Justice Party will probably use the Dr Kylie Cairns report to try and say that these dogs are dingoes, but in reality the Dr Kylie Cairns report is an Australia-wide sample of dogs that were tested for dingo DNA. This took dogs from the top end of Western Australia, from the Northern Territory – from the deserts. We make no argument; they probably are purebred dingoes. But the sample that it took from the north-east of Victoria was very small, and even the Kylie Cairns report itself acknowledges that the dogs in north-east Victoria are not likely to be dingoes. They may be interbred with dingoes, but these dogs are mostly domestic dogs that have gone wild and become ruthless killers.

I commend the government for having extended the wild dog unprotection order in the north-east of Victoria. My colleague Bill Tilley in the lower house and I lobbied very heavily for the unprotection order to be extended so that farmers in the north-east would not have to deal with the carnage that they

were dealing with morning after morning in previous years. The wild dog unprotection order has been very successful, but the fight with wild dogs is not over. If you go back to 2012 when it was actually implemented, trappers would catch 120 feral dogs a year. Now that number rarely tops 30. That does not mean that the problem has been solved, but it does mean that the unprotection order is working, that it should stay and that it should be extended.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (10:13): The Greens will be supporting this motion today and thank Ms Purcell for bringing this debate to the chamber. It is sad and shocking that we are in a situation of having to debate this. Despite some of the contributions highlighting the small geographic protection that has been provided, Victoria recently decided to renew the unprotection order for dingoes for a further four years to 2028. This is not justified on the evidence, and it may threaten the survival of this iconic dingo species. Despite being Australia's only native canid, dingoes are the only Australian mammal not protected, and despite being found across Australia, they are now considered to be between threatened and critically endangered.

I have asked the minister what consultation took place with traditional owners when deciding to continue this unprotection order. Last year the National First Nations' Dingo Declaration was signed by more than 20 traditional owners groups, and those groups called for an end to the culling and an end to the term 'wild dog' being applied to dingoes. Dingoes form an integral part of First Nations totems, Dreaming, lore and customs. Dingoes were seen as the protectors of women and children, hunting partners and companions. They were given burials similar to those of family members and were buried alongside their ancestors. Dingoes are a vital apex predator, and they add to the crucial balance of our ecosystem. Culling threatens native species that would face an increased risk of extinction, and in fact dingoes do contribute to the control of populations of foxes and wild cats. Dingo culling is a continued part of the legacy of colonisation. The Victorian government included dingoes in their wild dog bounty program, placing a price of \$120 on the head of each dingo. This was despite the resounding evidence available that dingoes are in fact not wild dogs. Upon this belated but embarrassing realisation by the government, as of June this year dingoes are no longer included in the bounty scheme, which is a really great step forward.

Dingoes have been demonised by the government and by farming industries despite 80 per cent of lamb deaths each year being a result of poor farm management practices. Notably the other 20 per cent is not made up of dingo kills. It is estimated that they make up 0.009 per cent of losses. Control methods for livestock that have proven to be effective are as simple as guardian dogs, donkeys or adequate fencing and do not require the killing of threatened species.

What are we doing in this country and in this state when too many of our Australian wildlife, unique in the world and a touchstone for how this nation defines its identity, are at profound risk? Have we become immune and therefore numb to the growing list of Australian animals at threat? Echidnas, platypus, koalas, some species of kangaroo, to name just a few, and now dingoes – there are no alternatives to these species, and we do not get a second chance to save them.

The Greens commend this motion. We believe, as well as there being great value in the substance of it, that government decision-making should be transparent and that all the documents listed should be in the public domain.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:16): I rise to join what is already a lively debate on a short-form documents motion this morning. I acknowledge Ms Purcell for bringing this motion into the chamber today for us to debate. Reaffirming my colleague Mr Batchelor, the government, as per customary practice, will not be opposing this short-form documents motion. As Mr Batchelor said, subject to it passing the chamber today, it will then go through the relevant and appropriate processes.

I will just briefly make note that, as has been discussed by other speakers in the debate already, the new dingo unprotection order permits the control of dingoes on private land and on public land that is

within 3 kilometres of a boundary with private land in eastern Victoria until 1 January 2028. The wild dog management program is being maintained and has been renamed the vertebrate species management program. This is in order to expand the focus of that program, which will continue over the next four years, to include species such as deer, which we will be discussing in another slot later this day, as well as industry pests such as feral cats, pigs and foxes. The bounty has now ceased, with those wild dog collections in north-west Victoria ceasing in March of this year and in eastern Victoria just last month.

As Mr Batchelor noted, extensive consultation has gone into this, with Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action officials having met with traditional owners, farmers, environmental scientists and other groups as well as local communities as part of the review into both dingo conservation and dingo management. There is, as Mr Batchelor also referred to, the \$2 million support package, which was announced at the same time that the decision was made.

There are other things I could say to this motion, but I am well aware that Mrs McArthur is anxious to add her voice to the debate as well, and I am very much looking forward to the spirited contribution which I am sure she will make, so I will conclude my remarks there.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (10:19): I rise to speak on this motion. As my colleague Ms Lovell has said, we support documents motions. Also like Ms Lovell, I will point out exactly why the government did the right thing by continuing the unprotection order. Well done, government.

Michael Galea: Rare praise indeed.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, and may it long continue, the unprotection order. Keep it going, because if you go out to a farm and you see what wild dogs do to lambs, you will be devastated. There is no such thing as humane deaths when wild dogs get involved. Ms Purcell referred to some support by traditional owners. Let me point out that the Duduroa Dhargal traditional owners agree with the government retaining the unprotection order. They praise the wild dog control program, saying it offers a balance between limiting the impacts of wild dogs on livestock production while allowing dingoes to remain undisturbed across much of our country. We also need to know that if you abolish this dingo unprotection order, watch out in the peri-urban areas where these wild dogs will be around. The pretty pussycats and the fluffy puppies will all be under threat, Ms Purcell.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Bus services

David ETTERSANK (Western Metropolitan) (10:21): I move:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

- (a) Melbourne is experiencing a surge in growth with the population expected to exceed 6.5 million people by 2036 and the majority of new residents are settling in outer suburban growth areas;
- (b) public transport infrastructure has not kept abreast with population growth in growth areas, leaving residents with limited or no access to reliable public transport;
- (c) the lack of transport:
 - (i) forces people to rely on costly private transport alternatives, exacerbating cost-of-living pressures for families and young people;
 - (ii) prevents people from getting to work, school, medical appointments and participating fully in their community;
- (d) the government's plans to build train infrastructure in growth areas will take decades to complete and require huge investment;

- (e) Infrastructure Victoria's 2023 report titled *Fast, Frequent, Fair* recognised the critical role buses could play in servicing outer suburbs and new growth areas and recommended the government:
 - (i) increase the frequency of bus services beginning with outer suburbs and growth areas;
 - (ii) update the principal public transport network to accurately align it with mass transit bus routes;
 - (iii) provide funding certainty for growth area buses, including direct funding to priority growth suburbs;
 - (iv) substantially reduce bus fares relative to other modes;
- (2) calls on the government to:
 - (a) review bus networks, particularly in growth areas, to identify gaps in service; and
 - (b) investigate the feasibility of a 12-month trial of free buses to ease cost-of-living pressures and enable residents to participate in their community.

If there is one thing that I love, it is a good route, and a timely and direct route is the best kind if you are doing it right. People in the inner ring suburbs of Melbourne know what I am talking about. Most of us are spoiled for choice, getting the full benefits of Melbourne's public transport network with train, tram and bus routes to take us where we want to go, located within walking distance and operating pretty frequently. If you live outside this relative public transport oasis, particularly if you live in Melbourne's outer growth areas, it is a very, very different story.

Somewhere along the line we dropped the ball on public transport. As Melbourne's population has grown and its boundaries have sprawled, its public transport options have contracted, and Melbourne continues to sprawl, particularly along the outer growth corridors. The government has a long-held policy to contain 70 per cent of its housing growth within established urban areas through infill development and 30 per cent in greenfield growth areas within the urban growth boundary. Of late this has not been happening so much, with only about 50 per cent of home approvals being built within the established LGAs, well below the 70 per cent target. New housing exploding along the south-eastern and north-western corridors poses a fundamental challenge. In fact I would not be surprised if the 70–30 ratio was reversed in the outer west, with new homes mostly being built in those greenfield growth areas. Homes in well-established areas like Boroondara have only grown 24 per cent in the last 30 years, whereas for the same period homes in Wyndham have increased by an eye-watering 439 per cent.

It is estimated that Melbourne will be home to around 7.5 million people by 2031, and as our population expands our outer suburbs will continue to absorb the brunt of this expansion. This is exemplified by the government's announcement last week of its plan to release huge tracts of land in greenfield zones in the north-west to accelerate housing development. Public transport is simply not keeping up with this growth.

I have spoken many times in this place about the lack of transport options in the outer western growth area, but even in the established urban areas, those inner and middle rings of the west, the access to public transport is pathetic compared to what is available for residents in the inner and middle rings of the eastern suburbs. Public transport is at its heart an equity issue. We know that a lack of decent public transport entrenches social disadvantage and isolation. It limits people's access to employment, education, health services and shops. It severely restricts their social life.

In my electorate the access to transport in Wyndham, Brimbank, Hobsons Bay and Melton is nothing short of atrocious, forcing people to rely on private transport and increasing cost-of-living pressures. It is no surprise that there are vast swathes of the west where a typical household will have between three and four private vehicles. People are really struggling. We hear from so many constituents who are trapped in new developments with no public transport. For example, Pawan is a single mum living with two children in Mount Atkinson. I have spoken before about the appalling state of affairs in Mount Atkinson. There are no trains, no shops, no local services. The nearest shop to simply pick up a bottle of milk or some toilet paper is a 15-minute drive away. The closest bus stop is a 40-minute walk from Pawan's home across unsealed road surfaces, and the nearest train station, which is

Rockbank, is an hour and 20 minutes. That bus – I should say that would be the first option – does not connect to shops or services, so it is of very limited use. Pawan’s children go to different schools, so she spends about \$200 a week in petrol just to get her kids to school and do a bit of shopping – she cannot afford to do much else. The public transport that does exist in the outer west is quite simply not fit for purpose. A recent study which compared the travel times of private cars to public transport in Melton found that the average trip time by car on a weekday was 22.5 minutes. On public transport that same trip was 71.5 minutes – so three times longer, and that is assuming the bus turns up. It is no wonder that households in the west have become so dependent on cars. 23.4 per cent of households in the Melton LGA own three or more vehicles – nearly a quarter of the local population.

More cars on the road means more congestion, more pollution and more carbon emissions – not to mention more individual stress. The further west you go, the worse it gets. This has not happened overnight. The situation is the result of historical planning inertia and underinvestment into public transport by Victorian governments of all persuasions, which is a great pity, because there was a time when our public transport system was the envy of other states. We do acknowledge that this government has spent billions and is committed to enhancing public transport. We recognise its commitment to building new train stations – the news is welcome. But we know those stations are not coming anytime soon. We recognise the commitment to increasing rolling stock. This new stock is also welcome. But we are really barely catching up with growing demand. Besides, these commitments will not lead to much improvement in the western suburbs.

We are well aware of the fiscal realities facing the government in these post-COVID times. We know there is not a lot of extra cash for additional rail infrastructure and that rail infrastructure takes a long, long time to complete. So what can be done quickly to give some relief to our outer-suburban residents who cannot easily access trains? You guessed it – it is buses. Buses are easy to deploy, require no major capital investment and can be up and running in a relatively short time. What we need is a comprehensive bus plan for our western suburbs – one that reconfigures our outmoded bus network to make buses more accessible, more frequent and more reliable. It needs to increase access so that residents are able to walk to a bus stop without needing the stamina of a long-distance runner.

That brings me back to my opening remarks. Who does not love a good route? We need a route review. A bus network review will identify transport black spots and modify routes to reduce waiting times, and connect people to other transport modes like train stations and get them to places they want to go to. We need to accelerate the rollout of new zero-emission buses. All of this should be accompanied by a broad-based community information campaign to inform and encourage residents to just hop on a bus. We might need some good old incentives to get people to just hop on a bus, because the reality is that many residents do not have much faith in the second-rate public transport that they have hitherto experienced, particularly out west. With the interminable wait times and the long, convoluted, time-consuming routes, it is no wonder people have been put off. So for a period of time let us make them free. We want people to get back into the habit of using buses. We want people to fall in love with buses, and why wouldn’t they? A reconfigured bus network with regular, fast and direct routes would be transformational for so many Victorians, and it is well and truly overdue.

If you look at an interactive network map showing the frequency of trams, trains and buses across Melbourne, the south-eastern part of the map shows a dense pattern of network coverage with some form of transport arriving roughly every 10 minutes or better in inner and middle-ring suburbs. You would think you were living in a proper, modern city. The very, very best you will get in the west is a 20-minute wait beyond that inner ring I spoke of earlier, and if you are talking about the outer ring, wait times range from 40 minutes to, well, never.

A well-known public transport expert by the name of Peter Parker – no, not that Peter Parker – has analysed bus routes across the city and concluded that the lack of services on the outer fringe and in large swathes of the north-west is entrenching inequality. And yet we have the buses. Reconfiguring and expanding our bus network would be the single best thing we could do to improve public transport in Melbourne and, as I have said before, it could be done at a fraction of the cost and time required to

build rail infrastructure. All Victorians deserve decent public transport. Buses can address the growing needs of Victorian communities. We just need the government to get on board.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:31): I want to thank Mr Ettershank for his motion this morning, which gives me the opportunity to talk about something I know a lot about, and that is buses. As a former branch secretary of the Transport Workers' Union, which has full coverage of bus members in Victoria, and a former president of the national union, I know a lot about this topic. While I want to acknowledge that the government is not in a position to support this motion today, as the 12-month trial of free buses is not economically feasible nor does it eliminate the main issue that Victorians care about, I appreciate the work Legalise Cannabis has done in this space.

The Allan Labor government has a proven track record of supporting our bus networks in Melbourne and regional Victoria. Over the past 10 years we have consistently put our money where our mouth is and invested in the state's public transport network. This government has taken several steps to ensure that Melburnians can enjoy fair and frequent bus services. This is because bus networks offer a range of benefits that contribute to the public transport system. They provide essential connectivity, linking people to employment, education, health care and other vital services. For many Victorians buses are the most accessible and affordable form of transport, particularly for those without cars. With over 19,000 bus stops across Melbourne and thousands more in regional areas, buses make it easier for people to access everyday essentials whether they live in the city or in remote areas. Buses are also an environmentally friendly option for reducing congestion and lowering emissions. They cut down on greenhouse gas emissions, making them a key part of tackling climate change.

Bus networks also contribute to the economy in a variety of ways. Buses can reach corners of our state and suburbs that trains and trams just cannot physically run to. Buses can drive all around Melbourne and to the most remote parts of our state, helping shuttle commuters to and from work. They ensure that it is easier for people to support local economies, and they create jobs in both the transport and maintenance sectors, providing long-term employment opportunities. Bus networks improve quality of life, promote environmental sustainability and foster economic growth, making them a vital part of any transport system.

What does the Victorian bus network look like? Annually more than 135 million trips are made using Melbourne's bus network. These trips are made using 400-plus bus routes operating in Melbourne. Our fleet currently consists of approximately 4500 buses that service these routes. These services cover over 5200 kilometres across metropolitan and regional areas. Currently 80 per cent of metropolitan Melburnians live within 400 metres of a bus stop. There are 19,000 metropolitan bus stops and 7000 regional bus stops. More than 30 of these are night routes, and more than 50 connect regional towns with other regional towns.

Overall we should be proud of our bus network. Across the state the Allan Labor government has been hard at work delivering expanded bus networks. Over the last decade we have seen a massive increase in bus services. Frequencies have skyrocketed, with this government introducing 20,000 bus services since 2014. That is right: 20,000. It has been prolific in all areas of transport, and our buses are no exception to that rule. Those across from me would gut funding to the bus networks just as they would gut funding to all other public transport services, but the Allan Labor government is dedicated to the growth of our bus network. We are in the business of expanding bus networks. The growth areas infrastructure contribution has ensured that as Melbourne's suburbs expand infrastructure is also introduced. Melbourne's population will reach 8 million by 2050, meaning that we need to be mindful how we adapt for that growth. The growth areas infrastructure contribution is designed to address that. Whilst the growth areas infrastructure contribution does not solely fund increases in bus services and routes, it makes significant opportunities for expansions. Aside from public transport, it would also fund the building of new communities. Infrastructure essential for education, health, economic development and general quality of life will be funded through the contribution.

But to return to buses, this contribution will also ensure an investment of \$150 million for the expansion of bus networks – that is \$150 million to areas that will be needing buses for their expected growth. In the west, north and south-east, as Melbourne expands, so will its bus network. We expect to introduce hundreds of new bus services over the next three years along with these growth area infrastructure contribution funded bus expansions. With this, Melbourne could become a city where the norm for a bus route is that you turn up to your stop and then you go. Outside of Melbourne we are ensuring the introduction of 200 regional bus services. Bus network growth is essential for Victoria.

Additionally, the Allan Labor government has been rolling out zero-emission buses across Victoria through a trial over the past two years. With the trial ending next year we have some very promising information about zero-emission buses to help with the full transition of our bus fleet. The zero-emission bus trial not only was a major win for Victoria in our path to a clean energy future but also showed promise for a better public transport network. Just last week the Allan Labor government released our road map towards a zero-emission bus fleet. The zero-emission bus fleet plan is set to seriously change the face of public transport in Melbourne, especially in areas more reliant on bus services.

The zero-emission bus plan will also have a massively positive impact on the manufacturing industry in Victoria. The plan provides a requirement for local manufacturing to be involved in the production line of zero-emission buses. That will have a huge benefit for jobs and the economy in many parts of Victoria. This will be done by creating opportunities for local manufacturers to build zero-emission buses and essential components for buses, boosting the state's economy. As we ramp up to roll out zero-emission buses, manufacturers can scale production, reducing costs. The transition supports the development of a new industry which creates skilled jobs in engineering and assembly. This plan strengthens the local manufacturing sector in Victoria, providing long-term economic and environmental benefits. Beyond manufacturing this will ensure that the workforce is prepared for the challenging demands of the transport industry and is equipped with the skills required to support a cleaner, greener future.

The zero-emission bus plan will also outline some the challenges the Allan Labor government will face as we continue to roll out zero-emission buses. One of the ways that we will be able to ensure bus coverage across Melbourne, even if demand cannot justify a new bus route, is by exploring the effectiveness of FlexiRide services. This may not be the same as introducing a new bus route to areas, but it certainly does increase public transport fairness and accessibility. FlexiRide is an on-demand bus service that operates with fixed routes or schedules from Croydon to Melton South. There are even services offered in regional areas. The service offers routes based on real-time demand, ensuring efficiency. It optimises the potential for bus routes. FlexiRide offers more flexibility and convenience than traditional bus services. It improves coverage in low-density areas that are underserved by regular buses.

FlexiRide also integrates with other public transport options, enhancing connectivity. By using zero-emission buses FlexiRide helps reduce emissions and helps tackle climate change. FlexiRide reduces congestion, provides tailored travel and supports sustainability. Ultimately, FlexiRide is a solution for areas that require public transport but do not have high enough demand to justify the expansion of a bus service to an area. There are no FlexiRide buses in my local community of Southern Metro, but there are plenty outside of it, and they cover many areas in Victoria, currently operating on the following routes: Croydon, Lilydale, Melton South, Mooroolbark, Rosebud, Rowville, Tarneit North, Woodend and finally the Yarrowonga and Mulwala FlexiRide service.

Between bus expansions, the zero-emission bus plan implementation and the ingenuity of the FlexiRide program, the Allan Labor government is dedicated to ensuring that Victoria is a state with easy access to the public transport we all need. Buses are essential to a community. They provide a reliable, affordable and sustainable way to travel. Public transport connects people to jobs, education,

health care and essential services. Buses are a vital link for those who do not have access to cars and other transport options.

With the introduction of zero-emission buses we are not only improving accessibility for our communities across Victoria but also significantly reducing our environmental impact. These buses are an integral part of the broader strategy to combat climate change. By replacing diesel-powered buses with electric vehicles, we are cutting down on harmful emissions, improving air quality and contributing to our commitment to reach zero net emissions by 2045, helping to create a more sustainable future for all.

The FlexiRide program further enhances accessibility, providing an on-demand service to areas that are not easily accessible or served by regular bus services. This flexibility ensures that people living in more remote and underserved areas can still rely on a convenient and efficient transport option. Through these initiatives we are making public transport more inclusive, reliable and sustainable. The growing network of buses will help reduce congestion on our roads and promote cleaner, greener air in our communities. The Allan Labor government is always and will always be there as the government that funds our buses. We live in a – *(Time expired)*

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:41): I am pleased to speak to Mr Ettershank's motion 541 concerning public transport infrastructure in Melbourne's outer suburban growth areas, especially in respect to improving bus networks. This is an issue that Mr Ettershank and I are commonly speaking in agreement on. I do not think there are two members of this Legislative Council that have spoken more in the chamber on buses, particularly buses in outer suburbs and things that are going on, and I suspect there is quite common agreement both in respect to the constituents of the outer-northern suburbs and the constituents of the outer-western suburbs in terms of the bus desert there is in many of our new housing estates.

It is no secret that Melbourne continues to grow at a rapid rate. As reported by the ABS, from 2001 to 2021 Melbourne's population grew by 42 per cent. Considering Sydney's population growth rate over the same period was 28 per cent, it is clear that Melbourne remains Australia's fastest growing city, and a growing population has resulted in Melbourne continuing to expand outwards. Unfortunately, such rapid growth in Melbourne's outer suburban growth areas has not been accompanied by adequate expansion of public infrastructure. This is an issue that the Liberals and Nationals take very seriously. We on this side of the house are deeply concerned that many of these outer suburbs lack basic infrastructure. Many lack footpaths, have single-lane roads, contain housing estates with one road in and one road out and lack community spaces. Speaking to residents, especially in the north, the west and the south-east, there is often associated disjointedness in the community when people cannot freely move around these suburbs. The sense of community does not exist either and fails to be at the same level as in older, more developed suburbs.

As this motion notes, an absence or inadequacy of public transport infrastructure results in residents relying on cars to get around. This leads to worsening congestion, pollution and wasted time. Infrastructure Victoria produced a report in December 2023, and I recommend all members read this one, *Fast, Frequent, Fair: How Buses Can Better Connect Melbourne*, which this motion refers to. It is well known that building new tram and train lines is an enormously costly undertaking, as this government has found out, which is why the report recommends an important interim step of expanding bus networks to grow public transport connections. However, those living in growth areas are the least likely to consider catching a bus, unfortunately, even when no other public transport is available. This could be different, though, if bus networks were improved, with up to 25 per cent of people in these areas willing to get rid of their cars if there existed a viable alternative means of transport. While not as visible as Melbourne's trams and trains, Melbourne's bus network offers five times more scheduled service kilometres than other networks. Despite this, the bus network carries the lowest number of passengers on all forms of public transport. Infrastructure Victoria suggests the economic benefits from implementation of these recommendations could result in between

\$2.4 billion and \$3.3 billion worth of travel saving benefits to public transport users over 20 years after implementation.

I take issue with the need for a 12-month free bus. For a good, reliable bus that is frequent, we know that the economic benefits are about \$2.45 for every \$1 put in, so we do not see the need for it to be free. The government have got us into a terrible budget position, and so while they say the economic times do not suit that particular policy, it is because of this government's decisions.

This government are not funding buses and new buses properly because of their decision to prioritise a \$216 billion rail line in the eastern suburbs. Back in 2018 when Daniel Andrews announced it – and he bypassed all the cabinet ministers here on the front bench in order to announce it on his Facebook page – it was the biggest public transport project in Australian history. Then it was called the Suburban Rail Loop, and then it was called SRL Airport – do not think we have forgotten about that one – at the last election, and now they are referring to it as Suburban Rail Loop less and now calling it 'Australia's biggest housing project'. They cannot get the name right. You cannot put lipstick on a pig. A dud project is a dud project, and you have chosen a tunnel in the eastern suburbs over fair, frequent and reliable buses in our growth areas. That is what you have done. That is what this government has done in prioritising the Suburban Rail Loop.

I am lucky to live alongside a bus stop, the good old 566, which I regularly take to the station, and then I take the train into the city. But many people in growth areas are not afforded that opportunity, and this is well documented, particularly in the suburb of Kalkallo in my electorate, with well established and publicised transport issues. It does have a bus but it only goes to the front of the estate, and the estate is now several kilometres deep, so for many it is a 2-kilometre walk to get to the actual bus, but the transport issues are so dire with Donnybrook Road being a single-lane road that the bus is incredibly unreliable. You have got a bizarre situation where the government has – which is welcome – funded a Craigieburn train station to Donnybrook train station bus, even though it is connected by V/Line, because it has not invested in electrification after being in so many Public Transport Victoria development plans. They plucked out a \$200 billion project that was not in any expert report PTV development plan to avoid actually funding transport projects in the outer north.

I have been successful, thankfully, in some advocacy on buses, particularly with my long campaign on buses in Greenvale. We were able to force the government to extend the 543 bus from Greenvale–Roxburgh Park all the way to Craigieburn Central. This is the situation that I established over a long time, in that no-one in these housing estates or areas was able to get to the nearest major shopping centre. I advocated for this for a long time. Not only did the government take up my suggestion of funding a bus to Craigieburn Central, they used the exact funding model which I advocated for, which was the growth areas infrastructure contribution fund. They obviously were panicked, because the local member for the neglectorate of Greenvale suddenly realised that people care about buses – and they do actually care about buses; many of them come to me and say that they will catch the bus.

I have not forgotten that my constituents also want a bus from Greenvale to Airport West and actual public transport connections to the airport. In the seat of Greenvale you can drive 15 minutes around that to the airport, but to get to the airport by bus takes over an hour on two separate buses. That is a bizarre situation considering so many thousands of people would take public transport to go to the airport or work at the airport. I want to talk about the estate of Hidden Valley. Over 2500 residents are in that community, and many of them have rallied for a bus. It still does not have a bus, and now there are lots of people moving into a retirement village there that is growing at a rapid rate, and they still do not have a bus that takes them to the centre of town or takes them to the train station. The minister has replied to my correspondence and to the community and is saying that the department of transport are investigating options for increased public transport, but we know that they have no money because they have prioritised the eastern suburbs Suburban Rail Loop over the good people of Wallan and the good people of Hidden Valley. Like everything else, they are prioritising a tunnel over the good people that live in our growth areas, and it is a disgrace.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:51): I rise to speak to motion 541 in my colleague David Ettershank's name. I would like to begin by echoing the comments of my colleague. I too love a good route, and I think it is something that everyone deserves to experience. But unfortunately, too many Victorians endure unsatisfying routes that take too long and go to all the wrong places. They trek long distances just to wait for a bus that never comes. We know that a poor-quality public transport network furthers cost-of-living pressures; generates more pollution; increases congestion; cuts people off from central services like education, health and employment; increases isolation; and entrenches disadvantage. And yet in Victoria we have a bus network that is infrequent, unreliable and expensive.

Melbourne's population is expected to grow rapidly in the coming years. As more and more people choose to call Melbourne home, the population will continue to spread further and further from the CBD. Without changes to our transport system, Melburnians are expected to face a 50 per cent increase in road congestion by 2036 – aren't we all looking forward to that? Not only does this have a billion-dollar cost to the economy, there is also a social cost, as anyone who is forced to regularly sit in traffic will know. Our public transport system has failed to grow with us, but change is possible. Buses can adapt, and they can adapt in a fast way.

In my region the 800 bus is just one example of public transport that failed to meet community needs. This service was incredibly limited and had no timetable upgrade for over 30 years, despite the immense population growth in the area. This is something that I have raised in this chamber several times, and thanks to the groundswell of community campaigning, we secured an upgraded service for this route. Starting in the coming weeks, route 800 will now have a new Sunday service, new weeknight trips and reduced weekend wait times, cutting the Saturday afternoon wait from 120 minutes to 30 minutes.

I would like to give a big shout-out to the #fix800bus campaign and the work of the Fix Dandy Buses group for achieving this incredible result. The 800 bus campaign was a success, but we know there are many more routes throughout Victoria that are well overdue for review. Once upon a time there was a dream to have everyone in Melbourne living within 400 metres of a bus stop, but the reality of this dream in a growing city is that bus frequency has been reduced, travel times have increased thanks to indirect routes and weekend services have been reduced or cut entirely.

A 2023 survey by the Metropolitan Transport Forum showed that only 25 per cent of Victorian commuters were satisfied with the current bus service, often citing infrequent services and indirect routes as the source of frustration. And what about Myki? As recently as last week we had a Myki meltdown. Thanks to a failure to account for the end of 3G and despite us living in the year 2024, our ticketing system still does not accept anything except a Myki. In light of recent reports about a legal stand-off over the contract for Myki's replacement, many, including me, fear they will not live long enough to see this change.

We have talked a bit today about free buses. When you think about how much money is poured into Myki, you have to consider: is this really the best use of resources, and potentially could we just get rid of Myki on buses and use that to help people accessing these services?

Melburnians are frustrated and do deserve better. This is why our motion calls for this government to undertake a route review of bus networks, particularly in growth areas, to identify transport black spots and modify routes to reduce commute and wait times, getting people to where they need to go. This kind of network reconfiguration of Victoria's complex and inefficient bus routes has broad support from groups like Infrastructure Victoria, the RACV, the Public Transport Users Association and the Committee for Melbourne.

This government has invested billions of dollars in long-term transport infrastructure like the Suburban Rail Loop, and I am not going to go into the merits of or disagree with the project today. I just want to highlight the fact that a lot of public transport investment is tied up in projects that will take many,

many years, if not decades, to complete, and this offers little comfort to those who need better public transport now, which is what buses can offer. The demands on public transport systems in Victoria are only set to get worse over the next few years unless this government invests in scalable, sustainable and cost-effective options in the short term – like buses, the only public transport option that moves with Victorians.

Better yet, what if we made these buses free? Like I mentioned earlier, you know it, I know it and we all know it: there is a cost-of-living crisis and hardly anyone is tapping on to begin with, so how much are we really losing, especially when the Myki reader is down because of the 3G issue? When times are tough the first thing people cut are the non-essentials. Unfortunately, for many those are social catch-ups with friends. But with free buses you could use the money saved to catch up with a friend for a coffee. We need people to get back to using public transport, something many living in the outskirts and regions have understandably put in the too-hard basket. It is our hope that if they experience such a good free route, their love of buses will be reinvigorated and the call for a route review will be even louder.

That is why our motion also asks the government to explore the feasibility of a 12-month trial of free bus services, providing tangible cost-of-living relief to those who most need it. We have seen the success of that pilot program in Queensland for a 50-cent fare, which has been adopted by the new Queensland coalition government. We expect that as part of the feasibility study into a free bus trial an education campaign would also be considered, and this could encourage a cultural shift about the benefits of jumping on a bus. Back to my point about Queensland: we actually see that particularly seniors are using the bus more and more because 50 cents is affordable for them, meaning they can get around and see friends. It limits their social isolation and gets them to where they need to be. We can be tramcentric in the city, but for many Victorians they are not actually an option. Like I said, this motion is for all Victorians, because they deserve a world-class and cost-effective public transport system, and we hope this government gets on board.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:59): Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak on motion 541 this morning, moved by Mr Ettershank. 541 – what a great number. Do you know what that is? That is a bus route in the Northern Metropolitan Region, and it is one that I know folks in the northern suburbs love. It is the Broadmeadows to Craigieburn North one. Can I tell you about another good bus route? That is number 540, just one off. I was a little bit cranky that the numbers did not work out, because that is the one for the bus stop that is at the end of my street. I have got three electorate officers that love the 540. I like using this route to get from one side to the other. It is pretty popular on AFLW days, can I just say, and that is one that Essendon, Clifton Hill, Fitzroy and Brunswick love a lot too. I am sorry that the numbers did not work out for the motion to be number 540, the most well-known bus route in my electorate, but 541 is still very much loved in the Northern Metropolitan Region.

Can I also address the motion with regard to the 12-month trial of free bus fares. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss this, as it allows us to have a really comprehensive conversation in what time I have got left about the work that the Allan Labor government has undertaken to strengthen Victoria's bus network and public transport more broadly. Thank you, Mr Ettershank, for your advocacy for your constituents. I acknowledge that this motion sprouts from your dedication to your community in the Western Metropolitan Region. However, like the speaker before from the government side, I will just reaffirm that we are not in a position to support this motion. You see, a trial of free bus fares across the state for 12 months is really not economically feasible and does not address the core issues that concern Victorians when it comes to public transport – namely, the frequency, the accessibility and the reliability of services. I know that those are very important. I admit that offering free rides does sound appealing, and I have got a sister in Queensland that is loving the 50-cent fares, I must confess, which were a really great initiative of the Miles Labor government. But we know that what Victorians really need are reliable and frequent services to get them to where they need to be when they need to be there.

The bus network, which I have had the good fortune to speak about here in this chamber a couple of times, is an essential part of our integrated public transport system, carrying over 135 million passengers each year and making up 21 per cent of all trips taken on the public transport network. The reach of our bus services is quite extraordinary and extensive, with over 80 per cent of those living in urban areas across Victoria being within walking distance of a bus stop. I know mine; it is 3 minutes 30 seconds and I am at a bus stop.

With more than 400 routes operating in metropolitan Melbourne and local bus services in more than 50 regional towns and cities, our bus network really is crucial for connecting people to their workplaces, schools and essential services. It is often the only option for young people, the elderly and those who cannot or choose not to drive. I know it is particularly popular around Parkville, the Melbourne University precinct and also the medical research institutes around there. We do know that buses complement our train and tram networks by filling in the gaps in services and connecting people in areas that rail just cannot reach. In fact around 34 per cent of bus trips also involve a tram or train connection, highlighting the role that buses play in creating a seamless and connected public transport system.

The Allan Labor government has worked carefully to make public transport affordable for all Victorians. Public transport fares are heavily subsidised – that is worth noting today – with passenger fares covering only about a third of the operating cost of the state’s metropolitan network. We offer some really generous concessions, including capped fares for 2-hour and daily travel and additional discounts for seniors, students and carers. Also I know that there was free travel for veterans on Remembrance Day, so can I just take a moment to acknowledge that initiative.

In March of this year we introduced the fairer fares policy, which has capped V/Line fares to match metro fares and reduced the costs for Victorians in regional areas. This was taken to the election and was enormously popular with Victorians, meaning that passengers now pay no more than \$10.60 for trips in regional Victoria. Some previously cost up to \$46, and that was an extraordinary cost. I know that that has been very, very popular, in fact saving Victorians over \$90 million on public transport since the introduction of the fare cap. And the busiest day for V/Line was in fact in October, so there you go. On weekends fares are further discounted, capped at \$7.20 for full fare and \$3.60 for concession. We have got the earlybird one, which is very popular, for commuters who touch on and off before 7:15. I know that that is popular with our tradespeople coming in to work on the Big Build right across the state, and this measure shows our commitment to providing fair and equitable transport options and making sure that our transport system is of course accessible for all Victorians.

Improving the bus network is not just about making the bus rides free, it is also about ensuring that the buses are reliable, frequent and connected to the services that people need. That is why we have developed *Victoria’s Bus Plan*, which is a strategic blueprint for an efficient, modern and environmentally sustainable bus network, aiming to increase the number of Victorians choosing to take the bus by providing simpler, safer and much more comfortable journeys. I tell you what, when one of those electronic bus timetables goes offline, I receive a wealth of demands from my community that it get fixed immediately. Knowing how quickly they do come back online, can I just take a moment to thank the Minister for Public and Active Transport Gabrielle Williams, because I tell you what, when it goes off on Bell Street I hear about it pretty quickly. We launched the bus plan in 2021 and have added or improved more than 200 bus routes across the state, adding an additional 4600 services each week, including improvements in over half of Victoria’s 79 local government areas, providing better services for those in metro and regional areas alike.

I talked yesterday on the Duties Amendment (More Homes) Bill 2024 about the growth areas infrastructure contribution fund, and I just want to make some additional comments on that. In the 2024–25 budget, along with the GAIC fund, we allocated \$180 million towards expanding bus services in Melbourne’s rapidly growing outer suburbs, supporting new and improved routes, helping to connect communities and making it easier for Victorians to access jobs, schools and essential services.

In the north – here we go – route 543 in Hume will extend to Craigieburn Central and the new route 524 will connect Kalkallo and Donnybrook station, complementing the express shuttle services introduced earlier in the year between Craigieburn and Donnybrook. They are just a few examples. I think it is the 923 – is that the one that goes all the way around Melbourne?

A member interjected.

Sheena WATT: I think it is the 901. I know where the stop is, and I have certainly taken that all the way around to Chadstone from the northern suburbs. I will tell you what, you hear some great stories about what is going on in our –

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): 903.

Sheena WATT: 903 – thank you, Acting President, for your assistance; I appreciate that very much. It is the one that picks me up on Bell Street and takes me all the way around to Chadstone. Can I just say that is one of my faves.

There is something I want to celebrate in the last little bit, and that is the introduction of 50 zero-emission buses across the network – there we go – with plans for all new public bus fleets to be zero-emission from mid-2025. Transitioning the 4500-strong bus fleet to zero emissions will not only reduce pollution but also provide quieter, smoother journeys for passengers, backed by our \$20 million ZEB trial and ongoing contracts with the operators. In closing, can I reiterate our support for buses in our state.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (11:09): I rise to speak on motion 541, as it is clear that the Victorian public transport network is failing hardworking families in my electorate. Whether it is shift workers catching the bus to work or children trying to get to school, buses play a vital role in connecting people in our suburbs. The reality in the west is there are simply not enough buses. The bus system is a decade behind what it is trying to cater to. The routes do not service the growing demand, as simply put by my constituents. There are no buses where you need them. In the areas where there are services, when the buses do arrive, they are often late. Having reliable public transport to get you to work or school on time is not a luxury, it is a necessity. When the bus system does not meet the basic requirements for frequency and reliability this has serious consequences for the lives of everyday Victorians.

Why do the western suburbs have a second-class public transport network, with only two modes of transport – buses and trains? Investment in public transport infrastructure has not kept up with population growth in the growth suburbs in the west, leaving residents with limited to no access to reliable public transport. The Allan Labor government's commitments to fund public transport in the west have fallen by the wayside. The Melbourne Airport rail link and the *Western Rail Plan*, both deemed critical infrastructure for Victorians in the west, have been put on ice. Every public transport project Labor puts on ice or cancels when it comes to the west shows that Labor cannot manage money, and Victorians in the west are paying the price again and again.

All Victorians are feeling the consequences of Labor's poor management of our public transport network, including workers and residents in the west. The need to look at the bus system is vital. Melbourne is experiencing an unprecedented surge in growth, especially in the western suburbs, with our population expected to exceed 6.5 million people by 2036. Most of those residents are settling in the growth suburbs, where despite promises to improve infrastructure, the trains and buses they were promised never arrived.

Some of the fastest growing suburbs in my electorate are Tarneit, Fraser Rise, Diggers Rest, Rockbank and Mount Atkinson. The bus network has not expanded or improved to keep up with the rapid population growth in these areas. Again and again the west is put on the backburner by this Labor government. Residents in the area are asking: where are the buses? Why are they so infrequent? Why

do they run late? And most importantly, why hasn't the government taken meaningful measures to address these issues?

Not only are they asking where the buses are, they are asking where the trains are that were promised by Labor time after time, election after election. In the Western Metropolitan Region – my electorate – the election promise of electrified Melton and Wyndham Vale railway lines was scrapped despite it being a commitment by this current Labor government during the 2018 and 2022 election campaigns.

All residents, no matter where they live, should have access to first-class public transport. Public transport should be a right, not a privilege. We must fight to ensure that it works for all Victorians, regardless of where they live.

The need for fast, reliable and affordable public transport is even more pressing in the current cost-of-living crisis. Families are already struggling to make ends meet, with the rising cost of living placing record pressure on household budgets. Many families in the west are battling just to keep the lights on, a roof over their heads and dinner on the table. Travelling to and from the inner west is a struggle. Lack of connectivity in roads and public transport does not help.

In my electorate families are doing it tough. The Allan Labor government is making life harder by effectively forcing families in these areas to rely on private vehicles to get to and from work and school and to meet family, and yet Victorians are paying some of the highest car registration fees in this country. The limited public transport options in the western suburbs force families to own more than two cars to meet family and friends. In Werribee in my electorate, for example, 69 per cent of households own two or more cars, significantly higher than the national average. Professor Graham Currie, chair of public transport at Monash University, has pointed out that 'there's very little public transport on the fringe'. We need to give commuters choices to save them money. The high cost of registration fees increases the burden felt by families on their budgets. Victorians are paying the highest registration fees in Australia, 76 per cent more than people in New South Wales. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis it is an untenable burden.

The Allan Labor government needs to stop neglecting the west and deliver what it promised. Connectivity in the west seems to be at the bottom of the list when it comes to planning under this Labor government. The \$10 billion airport rail link project has been shelved for four years, even after Melbourne Airport agreed to the location of the railway station, leaving its future uncertain. The electrified Melton railway line was cancelled, and the promised electrified Wyndham Vale line was cancelled. Project after project in the west has been shelved or cancelled because the Allan Labor government cannot manage money and cannot manage major projects. We have seen blowout after blowout, again and again, while they are funnelling billions of dollars to the Suburban Rail Loop in the east, where all the well-established suburbs have different modes of transport, like train, tram and bus services. With only two modes of transport in the west, buses are king when it comes to busting congestion and slashing air pollution.

Let us take a moment to look at some facts. A medium-size bus carries 30 to 50 passengers. This means every bus on a successful bus route that opens should take a minimum of 30 cars off the road. Buses are champions when it comes to reducing road congestion, urban air pollution and ultimately road accidents.

The call for improved bus connectivity in the western suburbs is not just a matter of convenience, it is a matter of fairness. The 2023 report of Infrastructure Victoria, *Fast, Frequent, Fair*, highlighted the critical role buses play in serving our outer suburbs and growth areas. The report recommends several actions, including increasing the frequency of bus services, starting with outer suburbs and growth areas; updating the principal public transport network to reflect mass transit bus service routes accurately; and maintaining bus services in growth areas, with direct funding allocated to priority suburbs like the western suburbs.

This Allan Labor government does not seem to be capable of delivering simple essential services when it comes to the western suburbs. While I do not agree with the proposal of free public transport, as nothing is for free in this world, better bus services are a priority for my constituents in the west. This would help to ease pressure and ensure that all residents can more easily engage and connect with their communities.

In closing, improved public transport service in the west is a must. The growing population in my suburbs and my region requires a transportation system that is reliable, efficient and accessible to all residents – all Victorians living in the west. More buses on the road would reduce congestion, cut air pollution and provide a sustainable alternative to private vehicle use. It is time the Allan Labor government took some action to deliver reliable public transport services to Victorians in the western suburbs.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (11:18): The Greens will be supporting this motion today, and I thank Mr Ettershank for bringing this important topic into the chamber for debate. We are living through a cost-of-living crisis and a climate crisis, and both of these require us to invest far more heavily in public transport in all its forms. The scale and the immediacy of both these crises demand we act at a scale that is not simply business as usual. I recently updated the chamber that in this climate crisis we have seen yet again that emissions from the transport sector continue to go up. They are projected to be the largest contributor to Australian emissions by 2030.

My adjournment to the Minister for Public and Active Transport recently called for action to reform Melbourne's public transport network with more frequent services that will get more people on board as one of the key strategies for bringing down transport emissions. Better bus services can be delivered quickly, and they require minimal infrastructure investment compared to other modes. They could be easily mobilised to provide options to those Victorian communities which have few or literally no public transport options at the moment.

With regard to the cost-of-living crisis, the Australian Automobile Association's online data tracker tells us that people could save on average \$26,000 a year if they did not need a car or a second car. That is a shocking figure, isn't it? For most households an additional \$26,000 would be a transformative amount. But people continue to be stuck in cars in some communities because the government is failing to provide viable alternatives to driving – the public transport services that they need and want simply are not there.

We know that public transport fares can be a deterrent, particularly for short trips, which deters people from hopping onto a bus or a train or a tram for those short trips around town. It is why the Greens took to our previous state election our climate ticket policy, which included free public transport for young people – free for under 21s – and capped fares at \$1 a day for fares on concession cards and \$3 a day for all adult fares. We also know that the main reason people say they are disappointed with buses in particular and public transport in general at the moment is wait times. People say that wait times are the main reason that they do not choose public transport, so the need to reform and improve our bus network is absolutely critical. Buses need to be useful for people to take advantage of them. Even if tickets are substantially cheaper, it is hard to take advantage of that and shift out of your car if you need to walk 2 kilometres to the nearest bus stop or if you need to travel on a Sunday and your local route does not even run on that day. Fast, frequent and direct buses would be useful to a lot more people, giving them a viable option to leave the car at home, not pay for petrol or even avoid buying a second car – coming back to that saving of \$26,000 per year.

Bus reform in Victoria has shamefully sputtered along under this Labor government. *Victoria's Bus Plan*, released in June 2021, contains some great statements about how buses could be reformed, but the follow-through has been piecemeal. Public Transport Victoria has done detailed consultation on bus reform in Melbourne's north and north-west and in Mildura, and the communities there have given their feedback in good faith. But from the outside those reforms appear to have stalled. It seems like

once PTV puts these suggestions to the Labor government and requests funding the interest kind of evaporates.

But we have seen some local campaigns succeed – powerful local campaigns, such as Fix 800 Bus, which managed to secure those extra weekend services. It is a credit to the community. Thanks to the government for listening to that community, and I hope that they will hear the calls for better buses that are coming loud and clear and progress the reforms that are so crucial and at the heart of this motion. Bring on bus reform to improve transport equity, reduce transport emissions and ensure that every Victorian has access to better buses.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:22): I rise to speak on a very exciting motion today, because we are talking about buses. I thank my colleague Mr Ettershank for bringing this very important subject to the chamber. As members will know, this is a topic that is very close to my heart. I seldom go a week in this place without talking about the exciting new bus route extensions in the south-east – the 831, 798, 928 and indeed the 925 just outside my region – on top of the \$150 million of growth areas infrastructure contribution funded, GAIC-funded, public transport projects that have just been announced too. We are very much looking forward to seeing come through.

I will take up a contribution from my region colleague Ms Payne, who rightly points to the successful campaign to get the route 800 bus service expanded, including Sunday operation. I am very much looking forward to seeing the first Sunday service on route 800, which runs from Dandenong to Chadstone through the heart of my electorate, not this Sunday but next Sunday. I know that along with my colleague Mr Tarlamis and the local members Eden Foster and Minister Gabrielle Williams we are all very excited to see that come through. I will also give a second shout-out in this debate to Mr Peter Parker, who was a staunch advocate for that extension. It is terrific to see that coming into place.

Buses are something that, as I outlined in my first speech, in many ways are the reason why I am in this place. It is what got me involved and interested in state politics, campaigning for upgrades to the 695 bus when I was a teenager and indeed for a new bus from Pakenham to Gembrook. I am very excited that, with my local Labor member at the time, we got that route delivered whilst I was a teenager. That route still runs today, connecting people to the jobs, services and trains at Pakenham. Just recently we had a school group coming in from the great school of Beaconhills, and I was actually quite pleasantly surprised to find out that one of the students who was here actually regularly catches that bus to go to school. I was very, very excited to hear about the usage of that. It really does highlight the importance of better bus services right across Melbourne, particularly in our outer suburbs and indeed in regional Victoria.

We know that for most Melburnians, let alone Victorians, around two-thirds – and potentially more now – live outside of walking distance from a train station or a tram stop. Buses are a really critical part of our transport network, an important part of the transport network particularly, and they work best when they do work as part of that network. With something like just over a third of all bus trips involving some other mode of public transport, most particularly trains but also of course trams, it is really important that we look at the issue of our network through that holistic lens. I will have some comments when we come to discussion of fare levels shortly.

I will go to that, but I do want to also make a brief note that Victoria does have a program under the current *Victoria's Bus Plan*. I have given just few examples in my electorate, but we have also seen previous extensions in the south-east, including the route 863 from Endeavour Hills to Hampton Park, extending that down to Cranbourne West shopping centre, and we have also seen an expansion to the route 895 service in the last few years. I could give countless more examples from my region and indeed from others, but I think it is really important to note that we do have a bus plan that is going to deliver those continued benefits and those network improvements too, because I do agree that there are still pockets of Melbourne where the network structure itself is not optimal. When you have slow, meandering bus routes, you actually drive down the potential patronage and you also of course require more resources to use it. Where you have clear, direct, logical bus routes, such as the extensions that

we are doing in, for example, Clyde North, utilising that grid network of roads to provide that real network and meshing effect of those bus routes and having the routes running as directly as possible – as directly as the council roads will allow – that means that you can really maximise the benefit of those bus services. Things like *Victoria's Bus Plan* are really important for delivering that, and I look forward to seeing even further and continued investment in that.

I do want to look at the subject of free public transport or free bus services, which have been proposed by Mr Ettershank. I think it is important to note that, whether it is near or far, when you look at examples from across the world you see that eliminating fares in and of itself does not particularly improve patronage. It does to a small degree, I grant you, but nowhere near enough to justify the cost of making it free. The things that drive patronage are service frequency, connectivity and reliability. Hypothetically, if you have a service running every 3 hours – most services run far better than that of course – there is no point in making it free because people will not use it. If you make it more frequent, though, people will use it, and you can look at examples from across the world. If you look at, for example, the Estonian capital of Tallinn, where they implemented free public transport, there was an increase in patronage, but it was very small and it was mostly people who were previously walking. They found that public transport use increased by 14 per cent in 2014 when they brought it in. However, car trips only declined by 5 per cent. Therefore it was mostly walkers doing short trips who would otherwise walk who were hopping on those buses, whereas foot traffic at the same time dropped by a staggering 40 per cent. Again, this goes to the concept of looking at public and active transport as a holistic concept.

We had an inquiry just a few years ago in this place into an expansion of the free tram zone that was done by the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. That too found that the majority of the increase of trips taken in the free tram zone in the inner city were actually a result of people no longer walking and taking the tram for just a few short stops instead. Indeed it is the network effect that makes it so important, because what you are trying to do is design a public transport network that allows that multimodal capacity. We know, for example, that already in Melbourne trams come very close to, if they do not already, breaking even on their service revenue and that there is a more considerable subsidy provided for bus and rail trips, as is appropriate. The fact that we cannot get such perfectly granular data on that is indeed because we have a multimodal fare system. It is a very good thing to have in fact, and you should not be punishing people who wish to complete their journey by train or by any other means by imposing a fare disparity between modes. Victoria was one of the first jurisdictions in Australia to recognise that. Many others still do not apply multimodal fares and they do punish people for transferring between modes. That is something that would be an unintended consequence of this motion.

But the network effect is very, very important. In mentioning the free tram zone I do note that we have seen some recent commentary about it from certain council candidates in the City of Melbourne, and I will take the opportunity to acknowledge and congratulate Nick Reece on his election win. I know he has got a particular interest in expanding the free tram zone, and I welcome it if the City of Melbourne wishes to fund that. They are certainly welcome to put that forward. If he is so interested in importing free public transport for the residents of the City of Melbourne at the expense of people in my region, at the expense of people in regional Victoria, I would welcome his proposal for the City of Melbourne to take over the entire funding of the free tram zone, if that is the direction that the City of Melbourne wishes to take.

This government, though, is focused on service delivery, because whilst I cannot agree with Mr Ettershank's remarks on fares, I am wholeheartedly sympathetic to his push for better services. That is why I am so excited to see the services which have already been announced as part of GAIC funding in my region but also in the south-west, in the west and in the north just this year, on top of the existing investments that have already been made and on top of many more that are sure to follow.

It is only by providing a feasible, attractive alternative to driving that we are going to start to see a real mode shift away from cars. That is what we have seen in other examples across Australia, across the

world and here in Melbourne when we have seen those rail upgrades, those rail extensions, those service frequency uplifts. We now have trains every 10 minutes in the Dandenong corridor, on the Frankston line as well and on very successful smart bus routes like the 903 that Ms Watt was talking about and also the 901, which serves my electorate. You see some very, very good patronage on that route as well. And with the new routes that we are rolling out on a higher frequency than those routes which were delivered as part of meeting our transport challenges 20 years ago, with the new routes being delivered as part of *Victoria's Bus Plan*, we are really seeing the patronage take off, and that is a very good thing. I will continue to support and advocate in government for the best bus services for my electorate and indeed for all Victorians.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (11:32): I also rise to speak on Mr Ettershank's motion, and while much of it seems uncontroversial, of course there is the little bit, (2)(b), of Mr Ettershank's motion, a call for the government to investigate the feasibility of a 12-month trial of free buses, which I cannot agree with. I cannot agree with it, because there is no such thing as 'free' buses. Somebody pays – the taxpayers. If he had said 'investigate the feasibility of heavily taxpayer-subsidised buses', it might have been closer to the mark.

There is nothing wrong with the concept of cheaper buses, but we should be dealing with the reasons that running buses – or any Victorian business in fact – is expensive and unviable in this state rather than chucking public money at a problem the government itself is making worse. The government should not be encouraging growth in areas unless they are prepared to provide the infrastructure that is required, but of course they do not do that even though we have got a windfall gains tax which just puts more money into consolidated revenue instead of being hypothecated to ensure that there are services available in new growth suburbs. They do not do that, so new growth suburbs suffer with a lack of infrastructure and a lack of services.

The best way to lower the cost of living is not to subsidise that cost by taxpayer borrowing – after all, we seem to be in some extraordinary debt in this state, greater than that of Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania combined – but to attack the root cause of higher costs. Substantial parts of that are the direct and indirect costs of government. We need to make it easier for bus operators to do business, and as with other businesses in Victoria there is a lot that can be done. I am not talking about cutting essential vehicle safety conditions or employing untrained drivers, but there is much overlay on top of this which adds to the cost, puts businesses under pressure, stops existing businesses from expanding and discourages Victorians from starting new enterprises. There are obvious things like payroll taxes and jacked-up council rates but also less obvious ones like property taxes and stamp duty that affect businesses too. Then we have got the gender equality action plans and excessive environmental regulation achieving little but tick-box compliance, while renewable projects across the state devastate vast swathes of far more precious ecology. Compliance with procurement red tape when bidding for any contracts is also an issue. Wage theft legislation, unfair legal liability and the onus to disprove blame are other issues.

Every other week in this chamber we are discussing another friendly-sounding nail in the coffin of business, but who on earth would start a business in Victoria or expand one or invest in one? And that includes bus operators. You are just killing business in this state. They are fleeing out of Victoria –

Michael Galea: On a point of order, President, on relevance, we have limited space to talk about buses, and I am very anxious that we talk about buses for as much as we can in this time.

Bev McArthur interjected.

The PRESIDENT: I was just going to rule in your favour. I think Mrs McArthur was being relevant to the motion.

Bev McARTHUR: Mr Galea – I hope he just gets on his bus. I can assure you I am absolutely going to the point of the poor bus operators. Who would be a bus operator in Victoria? A Labor government in hock to the unions makes it harder too. Just ask companies like Ventura, CDC,

Transdev and Dysons, who face the militant strike-threatening Transport Workers' Union whenever they try to deal with their staff.

John Berger interjected.

Bev McARTHUR: That is absolutely right, Mr Berger. The government needs to be more flexible too. I sat on the Economy and Infrastructure Committee inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria, which reported in November 2021. We have got school buses lying idle in parking lots which should be able to be used for the full day. We even looked at whether people could get on a school bus and travel; there are all sorts of problems with security and goodness knows what. But let us be more flexible about using the facilities we have got, and school buses sitting in a parking lot is an absolute waste of everybody's money. We heard from the boss of the private bus operators lobby, who said they can quickly gear up to provide a service but are inhibited by government. So we have got situation, Mr Ettershank, where the private bus operators in this state could gear up to provide the bus services you need but the government is holding them back. Do not worry about free buses, let us just get the private sector working viably and the government not prohibiting them, and we will get the show on the road and get buses on the road.

It is unacceptable for the government to reap the benefits of massive suburban growth, as I said, in the windfall gains tax and in all the other levies, which add 50 per cent of the cost of constructing a house in Victoria alone. It is unacceptable for them to grab these benefits but fail to provide the infrastructure which makes these suburbs viable. You are absolutely right, Mr Ettershank, there is not the infrastructure that there should be if we are going to have growth in suburbs, because the government is not interested. They are really only interested in one project: the Suburban Rail Loop. Tell us what is happening out in the country. We cannot even drive on a road in the country for the potholes, let alone get a bus, Mr Ettershank; there are no such things as buses in the country by and large.

A member interjected.

Bev McARTHUR: There are not. Public transport is a non-existent phenomenon outside the tram tracks of Melbourne. What we need is a proper approach by government to provide the infrastructure that is required for people to (a) have public transport, and (b) if you are going to expand housing developments outside the tram tracks of Melbourne, then you have got to provide the infrastructure, and the windfall gains tax should enable the government to provide the proper infrastructure that is required. What is more, they just need to get behind the private bus sector, which could quickly gear up and provide the services that you are looking for, Mr Ettershank.

I support the kind of general concept that we need the infrastructure, but I cannot support the notion of 'free'. There is no such thing as free. Somebody pays, and it is the poor, hardworking, unsuspecting taxpayer who is constantly inflicted with ideas of free this and free that. So, no free stuff, but yes, we need the infrastructure in all these growth suburbs that Mr Mulholland is responsible for and where there is a lack of services, absolutely.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (11:41): I welcome the motion by Legalise Cannabis Victoria and thank Mr Ettershank for bringing this forward. We are very supportive of the motion's call to prioritise and strengthen bus networks in growth areas across Victoria, and I would like to take the opportunity to talk about the need for this in regional centres like Ballarat, Geelong and the Surf Coast, which share many similarities with the issues that are being faced in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

I want to use this opportunity to echo the words of my colleague and restate the Greens commitment to advocating for better public transport. This includes our policy for accessible fares, free public transport for people under 21, \$1 a day concession fares and \$3 a day adult fares across the entire network – that one is for you, Bev.

While Melbourne's population growth is placing undeniable strain on transport systems, regional areas are also experiencing rapid expansion and are facing similar challenges due to limited public transport options. In cities like Ballarat the population continues to grow, yet communities like Lucas and Delacombe remain underserved or entirely without reliable bus services, so much so that the member for Ripon in the other place, a member of this Labor government, has created her own petition to her own government seeking a bus route to serve the community of Lucas. Meanwhile, longstanding routes to suburbs like Miners Rest still have no services on Sundays, as though people do not have any need to travel on a Sunday. A review of public transport across the entire City of Ballarat will better help to alleviate these pressures, support the local economy and promote sustainable living.

Geelong and the Surf Coast are likewise in urgent need of enhanced bus services. Armstrong Creek and Torquay are fast-growing suburbs where limited bus services prevent many from accessing essential services, employment and education, and this is leading to a significant increase in congestion along the roads coming out of those suburbs, because there is no option other than car transport. Those areas are incredibly car dependent – well over 90 per cent car dependence in the Greater Geelong region, and that is not sustainable for a city that is going to essentially double its population over the next couple of decades. The recent improvements in these areas are a positive step, yet more frequent services, extended hours and greater coverage are required to meet the needs of these communities. A targeted review and subsequent enhancement of bus services can help to reduce the reliance on costly car travel, thus easing cost-of-living burdens and improving quality of life.

In cities like Ballarat and Geelong unreliable and infrequent public transport pushes families towards car dependency and the associated costs. In Geelong 84 per cent of households own at least one car, while in Ballarat that number increases to 90 per cent. Around half of those families own two or more cars. In this conversation there is no consideration for the people who cannot drive or who do not have access to a car for various reasons. They are entirely dependent on other forms of transport, and without access to bus services they are extremely limited in their ability to participate in all types of activities across society. By implementing recommendations on bus frequency and long-term funding certainty, the government has an opportunity to provide regional communities with fast, frequent and affordable transport options. Expanding the role of buses in growth areas will address current gaps and ensure that public transport evolves with Victoria's expanding population, making it easier for residents in regional centres to connect, thrive and participate fully in their communities.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (11:45): I will keep my comments brief. Firstly, could I just thank all of the speakers who have participated so enthusiastically in this discussion; it is heartening. I think that we clearly have a case of furious agreement that there is a need for more buses, better buses, more often. We need more reliable buses. We need buses that are accessible to communities. It was put to me the other day that one metric might be: no more than 15 minutes to walk and no more than 15 minutes to wait. The reality is that for so many people, particularly in our outer suburbs – I take on board also in regional and other areas – that is a fantasy; it is not even possible. So we need reliable, accessible, frequent buses. We need routes that are more strategic that take people from their homes to their work, to their places of recreation and to other modes of transport, with that connectivity and that coordination between services, and again that is lacking. Finally, it needs to be affordable. If you are out in zone 3, it is not cheap, particularly if the service is unreliable and slow.

I think I would just like to say that we recognise that the government is putting a lot of thought into this and that there is action underway, and we commend that. But it is not fast enough and is not big enough, and the government needs to do better. This is on your watch. Clearly, there is an immense feeling within the community, particularly in the middle and outer ring suburbs and in regional areas, that it needs to be better.

I guess the thing that is amazing me as we come to the end of this debate is that we are all in furious agreement, but both major parties are going to vote against this, and it is on the basis that there is no support for part (2)(b), which is calling for an investigation into free buses. I thank Mrs McArthur, who has now left us, for identifying those particular words, and I guess my mind strikes the discretion

of 'investigate free buses'. I do actually want to take up Mrs McArthur, and I am so sorry that I am only talking to her chair. I think she said, 'There's no such thing as a free ride.' I guess you come to this place and you go, 'Let's debate. That's healthy. That's democracy. Let's debate. Let's argue. Let's run the merits.' Then there is that thing where you go beyond that and you move into hypocrisy, because the reality is that all of us who are so privileged as to be elected to this place have free buses for life, Mrs McArthur. Yet you would say to the rest of the community, 'You're not entitled to that.' I think that is just hypocrisy.

Having said that, I would just like to conclude by saying that in pushing for an investigation of things such as free buses we are blind if we do not recognise that whilst there are some really crowded buses, there are a huge number of buses that are significantly underutilised. It is very clear that if we want to get utilisation up and if we want to get people back into the habit of getting on buses – and many people have never had that experience or have fallen away from it – then we need to incentivise. We need to open people's minds. Let us do that. The 50-cent bus fares in Brisbane resulted, I think, in a 16 per cent increase in utilisation in a very, very short timeframe. Why wouldn't we also be pursuing that?

I would just like to say that if the major parties cannot find their way to support this, I will be, as I think many in the community will be, very disappointed. That said, I thank you for your enthusiasm and your commitment to buses.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, I just want to place on record that I was not in the chamber when this happened but I was in my office watching the debate, and I note that both Mr Ettershank and Ms Payne in their contributions on this motion used the words 'Everyone loves a good route.' I find those comments offensive. I understand that under the standing orders the matter may not be able to be dealt with right now because I was not present at the time, but I want to place on record that I find those comments offensive. They are in poor taste, and people who come into this place agree we should be able to debate these matters, but it should be done in a respectful manner and without having to resort to using the Legislative Council as a toilet.

The PRESIDENT: You are correct in saying standing orders 12.18 and 12.19 talk about members finding words offensive, but the point of order needs to be taken immediately; it cannot be after the fact.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (6): Katherine Copsey, David Ettershank, Sarah Mansfield, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell

Noes (30): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Motion negatived.

Bills

Agriculture and Food Safety Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

Council's amendments

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea) (11:57): I have received a message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly informs the Legislative Council that, in relation to 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Dairy Act 2000**, the **Food Act 1984**, the **Meat Industry Act 1993** and the **Seafood Safety Act 2003** and for other purposes' the amendments made by the Council have been agreed to.

I acknowledge a former member in the gallery, Mr George Cox.

The PRESIDENT: Before we start question time I welcome to the gallery a previous member of the Legislative Assembly, Mr Robert Clark.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Department of Education

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:00): (733) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Education. The number of lawyers and legal professionals employed by the Victorian Department of Education's legal services division appears to be disproportionately large – around 100 – compared to other states, some of which apparently have less than 10. Why does the Victorian government Department of Education require a 100-strong legal services division?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:00): I thank Mrs Deeming for her question, and I will refer it in accordance with the standing orders to the Minister for Education.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:01): If it is all right, I have decided to put the second half of my question privately to the minister.

Child protection

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:01): (734) My question is to the Minister for Children. Minister, confidential guidelines for state residential care home staff inform employees how to supervise children while they inject illegal drugs. Why has the minister turned children's residential care homes into new drug-injecting rooms?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:01): I thank Ms Crozier for her question, which reaches a new low. Let me assure –

Members interjecting.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, Ms Crozier. You have asked the question. Would you like to hear an answer?

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Ms Crozier, if you would like me to answer the question, perhaps you would give me the opportunity.

What I can assure the house is that there are program requirements that ensure that community service organisations who partner in the important service delivery of residential care have written policies and procedures in place that all staff should be familiar with, that are readily accessible to all staff and which outline the following: the CSO's policy on sexuality education, the CSO's policy on substance abuse, the CSO's policy on cigarette smoking and also on infection control procedures. CSOs, the community service organisations, which partner with government in the delivery of important residential care services to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our community, must have policies concerning how to respond to substance abuse, including inhalants, including alcohol and including other drug use, and that response is an important part, as the Premier went to in her response to these questions yesterday.

All children in residential care with substance abuse issues must also be referred to a drug and alcohol treatment service, and CSOs will ensure care teams explore any substance abuse issues and coordinate an appropriate response for each and every child in the best interests of that child and in accordance with the case plan goals for that child. I am also further advised that CSOs, inclusive of those providing residential care, are required to comply with the guidelines for community care for the drug and

alcohol sector, which firstly says no illicit drugs are allowed on premises. All children and young people with substance use issues must be referred to drug and alcohol treatment services. Children and young people are not permitted to have any non-prescribed inhalants in their possession or use such inhalants in residential care facilities. Strategies relying on passive observation of clients using such substances are not permitted, and CSOs are expected to do everything reasonable and consistent within safe work practices to stop young people from using those non-prescribed inhalants, to remove inhaling implements as soon as is possible and also to reinforce that using non-prescribed inhalants is not permitted. In situations where children and young people may present, having used such substances, to a residential care facility, which, Ms Crozier, can at times happen, in a substance-affected state, there is a duty of care to ensure that those children and young people are responsibly and appropriately assisted. The Premier went to that in her answer yesterday.

If that is not what you would do, then I would hate to see a situation where those opposite had the responsibility for the care of these children and young people. What I will say is if there is a breach, there are actions that can be taken, Ms Crozier, but I absolutely reject the premise of your question.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:05): It is a pity the minister continues to refuse to understand what is going on under her watch. Under your watch, vulnerable children in state residential care homes are being allowed to inject illegal drugs in their rooms. That is putting their lives at risk. State residential care home staff feel powerless to intervene. In your answer to the substantive question you said that the children are referred to alcohol and drug rehab treatment services. How many children have been referred to drug and alcohol rehab treatment services as a result of them illegally injecting drugs in state residential care homes?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:05): Again, at the outset I will say no illicit drugs are allowed on premises. I absolutely reject your premise that –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Ms Crozier, I reject your premise that illicit drugs are allowed on site. What I will also acknowledge is that at times children and young people who have substance abuse issues do need to be appropriately and responsibly assisted, and as our guidelines state, children and young people who have substance abuse issues are required to be referred to services. In the best interests of each and every child and in accordance with their case plan goals, those decisions are made to refer those children, as is required because of their conditions or their circumstances, to those services, Ms Crozier. As I have said in this house before, to reduce these conversations to individual questions about individual matters is simply inappropriate.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:06): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: kindergarten funding

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:07): I rise to inform the house about the recipients of the latest round of Building Blocks capacity and planning stream grants. Since Building Blocks launched in 2020, the Labor government has announced over 230 capacity and planning grants to build and expand kindergartens, creating thousands of new kinder places for local children across the state. The most recent round will provide recipients with \$16.4 million to build and expand kinders as well as providing \$278,700 to support planning for future projects across the state. The \$278,700 will provide funding for two organisations to plan kinder infrastructure projects across the state. These grants are crucial in supporting the rollout of three-year-old kinder across Victoria by providing grants for planning and preconstruction work.

We also announced that three services across Victoria will share in \$16.4 million to create 475 new kinder places, providing quality early learning when and where it is needed most. This includes the Beis Menachem Community Centre, which I had the pleasure of visiting last week for this announcement alongside the member for Bentleigh in the other place. During this visit I was able to hear about their plans to create a new integrated building that will have four kinder classrooms and multipurpose rooms that will allow the centre to provide a range of professional services to support the children and families in their community. These capacity-building grants are the foundation of the Victorian government's Best Start, Best Life reforms as they provide the infrastructure needed to support the rollout of nation-leading reforms, including free kinder, pre-prep and three-year-old kinder.

We are proud to be a government that can talk about the essential reforms that are underway, which continue the provision of quality early learning to children across every corner of Victoria. The Building Blocks capacity and planning streams are open all year round, and I encourage all eligible organisations to apply and give children the best start to lifelong learning. I look forward to seeing how these grants are utilised to benefit and support the littlest members of our community for years to come.

Boat ramps

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:09): (735) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Outdoor Recreation in the other place. The government has invested heavily in boating infrastructure, which is welcome, but it has not come without a few issues. The maintenance of the new or refurbished ramps seems to be a pain point. Like most things you build, ongoing care is needed for peak performance. I have been sent pictures of the Avalon boat ramp, which looks pretty ordinary – ordinary to the point of almost being impassable due to the build-up of seaweed and other items that wash up as a result of the natural way wave action works. I am told this is not an isolated case and that many other places have similar issues. My question is: particularly as it is peak snapper season and the boat ramps are probably at their peak usage, will the minister prioritise the immediate maintenance and clean-up of boat ramps to ensure that the nearly 1 million fishos in Victoria that fish from a boat can get their boats in and out of the water safely?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:09): I thank Mr Bourman for his question. The matter will be referred to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation for a response consistent with the standing orders.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:10): I thank the minister for forwarding it on. I know cash is a bit tight for the government now, but will the government allocate sufficient funding for ongoing clean-up and clearing works of the boat ramps to ensure that the public is getting the most it can out of the investment made in this infrastructure?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:10): Again I thank Mr Bourman for his question, and consistent with the substantive question the supplementary will be referred to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation.

Probate fees

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:10): (736) My question is to the Attorney-General. In hiking probate fees by up to 650 per cent, the Allan Labor government was warned that this would promote elder abuse by future beneficiaries pressuring elders to transfer assets prior to death to avoid paying increased probate fees. In response to this prospect of increased elder abuse, the government has admitted it is still a risk. Why has the Allan Labor government put gouging probate fees from grieving families ahead of protecting Victorian seniors from elder abuse?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:11): I thank Mr Mulholland for his question and the continued conversation about probate fees. As I said yesterday, this is about making the system fairer. It is about abolishing fees for small estates and keeping medium-sized fees, which continue to be cheaper than New South Wales and South Australia.

As I said yesterday, the policy is about ensuring that those complex cases that take up the time and resources of the courts are paying appropriately for those services whilst being able to reduce the burden on smaller estates. The consultation was extensive, and there are a range of views on this matter that have been taken into consideration in forming the policy.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:12): The government's own document notes that financial abuse is most likely to occur for assets such as cash. By imposing a hugely increased new up-front fee for probate, elderly Victorians may now face pressure to transfer significant amounts of cash to their children prior to death to cover these new fees. What specific action will the Attorney-General take to ensure that this government's probate cash grab will not lead to an increase in elder abuse to vulnerable Victorians?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:12): I thank Mr Mulholland for his supplementary question. Of course elder abuse is a concern in the community. I do not shy away from that, but I come back to the premise and the policy position in relation to probate. It is about fairness, it is about covering costs and it is about ensuring that those estates that are multimillion-dollar estates are paying more for the probate –

Members interjecting.

Jaelyn SYMES: What I would say in relation to elder abuse is this is a matter that regularly is raised with me by community legal centres in particular. It is an issue that many of our CLCs are focused on in relation to responding to and preventing. I commend them for their work, and we will continue to support them in relation to that.

Ministers statements: LGBTIQ+ community

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:13): Today marks the start of Trans Awareness Week, which is held annually to recognise and celebrate trans and gender-diverse communities in the lead-up to the Transgender Day of Remembrance on 20 November. Trans Day of Remembrance honours the lives of trans and gender-diverse people lost to acts of transphobia, violence and the impacts of stigma and discrimination. The past year has presented some really significant challenges for our trans and gender-diverse communities, and I acknowledge the difficulties and distress caused as a result.

Let me be really clear: in Victoria equality is not negotiable, and the Allan Labor government remains committed to ensuring that trans and gender-diverse Victorians can live their lives wholly and freely as their authentic selves. We have launched an Australian-first and award-winning government campaign, The Unsaid Says a Lot, showing just how easily we can include and respect trans and gender-diverse people of all ages throughout our everyday interactions. We have appointed a new commissioner for LGBTIQ+ communities, Joe Ball, who just this week has welcomed his beautiful baby daughter Rosa to the world, and we are continuing to advance our 10-year nation-leading strategy *Pride in Our Future* right across Victoria. We are also progressing Pride in Ageing, ensuring that older LGBTIQ+ people can age with dignity and safety, connected to community across all corners of our state.

I continue my support of the integral work led by the Attorney-General in progressing anti-vilification reforms, extending protections for our LGBTIQ+ communities and also people living with a disability – intersectionality is such an important part of this work. To all trans and gender-diverse Victorians: please know that you are loved, supported and celebrated and we will not stop working to ensure that your rights and your stories, your dignity and your identities are protected.

Social media age limits

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:15): (737) My question is directed to the minister representing the Premier. The federal government recently announced a social media ban for children under 16, which effectively overrides the rights of parents to be able to make these decisions.

It was also reported recently that at national cabinet the premiers from each state agreed to some sort of plan. My question for the Premier is: what exactly was agreed to on behalf of Victoria?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:16): I thank Mr Limbrick for his question. To my knowledge most of that is public already, but I am sure that the Premier will be more than happy to provide you with a response on the specifics.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:16): I thank the Attorney for passing that on. My supplementary is: there is an organisation in Victoria, 6 News Australia, that was founded in this state. In my view they are the best media outlet in our nation. This news outlet also happens to be run by teenagers, many of them under 16. If this law was in effect, effectively this organisation could never have existed and it would effectively be shut down. My question to the Premier is: what will the Premier do to ensure that 6 News can continue operations?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:17): I will pass Mr Limbrick's supplementary on to the Premier.

Country Fire Authority

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:17): (738) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. On the cusp of what is forecast to be an above-average fire risk season, CFA captains in East Gippsland have received advice:

... due to further ongoing staffing issues the District Office may be closed temporarily at times over the next few weeks.

The phones may ... be diverted to another District ...

If you need to see someone in the office, I advise to please try to make an appointment to see them as the front door may be locked.

I understand this may cause some difficulties however the issues are out of our hands and cannot be resolved in the short term.

Minister, why have you gutted our fire services to the level that district offices are closed, doors are locked and phones diverted?

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:18): I will acknowledge Minister Shing's interjection, but I will not seek to politicise this answer, because I think that the way you framed it is that you have attempted to do so. I will make inquiries in relation to the specific district office. I can confirm that it is not due to any budgetary issues that I am aware of that would mean that there are vacancies. I will find out what is going on in that particular region, and I will provide you with that advice.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:18): I thank the minister for her response. Minister, can you guarantee the people of East Gippsland, one of the most fire-prone regions in the world, that their local CFA office will be open and fully staffed now until the end of the fire season?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:19): Ms Bath, as I have committed to getting you some further advice in relation to the staffing allocations at CFA, I would remind you that I will receive that advice from CFA. I do not direct the operations of deployment of staff to any part of the state. However, I can confirm that CFA, in conjunction with their emergency services partners, assess risk to communities in identifying the deployment of personnel, resources et cetera, and particularly responding to high-risk days and the like, they mobilise their teams and move people around the state. So in relation to preparedness and the ability to respond to risk, I have full confidence in our fire agencies in that regard.

Ministers statements: senior citizens

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:20): I rise to update the house on a month of celebrating our senior Victorians. The Victorian Seniors Festival officially concluded on 31 October after a jam-packed month of country concerts, dances, exhibitions, film festivals and sporting activities right across metro Melbourne and regional Victoria. The festival was all about joy, connection and celebration, and it showcased the passion and creativity of our seniors. It was a pleasure to join a number of events across the month.

I also had the pleasure of meeting with nurses, clinical managers and other staff from our Victorian public sector residential aged care services at their statewide forum last week. The focus of the forum was getting PSRACS ready for aged care reform, with a focus on the Commonwealth's new aged care act as well as sharing the knowledge and skills that help us to deliver the best care in the right location for older Victorians. It was excellent to chat with a number of nurses one on one and hear firsthand from them about their incredible work. I look forward to taking them up on their many invitations to visit their services and meet the teams delivering high-quality care right across our communities. I thank our PSRACS staff for the work they do every day to provide high-quality care to older Victorians living in our public facilities. Our Victorian PSRACS continue to lead the nation, and I am confident that we are well placed to continue to deliver that very high quality care as we move through these new reforms from the Commonwealth.

Gambling harm

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:21): (739) My question is directed to the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation in the other place. Gambling-related harms amongst some of our most disadvantaged Victorians remain unacceptably high despite recent reforms. The City of Brimbank is the second-most disadvantaged LGA in Melbourne and also has the highest electronic gaming machine losses of any LGA in the state, with a staggering \$172 million lost on the pokies over the previous year – that is \$475,000 every day. Mandatory closing hours for venues from 4 am to 10 am do not go far enough, as evidence clearly shows that the most harm is likely to be suffered by those playing between midnight and 2 am. So I ask: will the government introduce mandatory closing times from midnight to 10 am for venues to reduce the extraordinary harms experienced by problem gamblers in my electorate?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:23): I thank Mr Ettershank for his question, which I will refer in accordance with the standing orders to the relevant minister in the other place.

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:23): I thank the minister for passing that on. Gambling organisations and electronic gaming venues receive an 8.33 per cent tax break under the proviso that this money is spent on the community and for the community's benefit. Analysis of the industry's community contribution shows that there are limited demonstrable benefits to the community under this arrangement and that the overall value of contributions is often inflated. A 2023 PAEC inquiry recommended the government consider scrapping the existing community benefit arrangements and redirecting the 8.33 per cent to a publicly managed fund targeted at preventing and reducing gambling-related harm, which the government supports in principle. I ask: when will the government implement this recommendation?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:24): Thank you, Mr Ettershank. I will, again, refer your supplementary to the relevant minister in the other place.

Youth justice system

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:24): (740) My question is for the Minister for Youth Justice. Minister, twice this week young offenders in the Parkville detention centre have assaulted

staff, gained access to secure areas and used a CO₂ fire extinguisher to threaten others. Under your leadership as minister, staff in Victoria's youth detention centres are less safe at work. As a result, many experienced staff have resigned and entry-level staff are not coping with the increased pressure, with many leaving after a short period of working. I therefore ask, Minister: what action is the government taking to ensure staff are safe at work in Victoria's youth detention centres?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:24): I thank Mr Davis for his question. I must from the outset reject the premise of Mr Davis's question. There are quite a number of inaccuracies there. But what I will say is that I might take this opportunity to acknowledge our hardworking, dedicated staff in our youth justice system. They are very, very hardworking and very committed. It is one of the privileges of this role to go out to our custodial facilities and our youth justice facilities and meet the dedicated staff on the front line making a difference.

In relation to staff safety, every Victorian worker deserves to feel safe. No government in the history of this state has done more, whether it be manslaughter laws, wage theft laws or, specific to youth justice, laws regarding emergency services workers and people in our youth justice system. Any assault on staff is unacceptable, and where incidents take place they are appropriately referred to Victoria Police. I can say that we have a zero-tolerance approach to these kinds of incidents. You know, Mr Davis, that I cannot get into individual incidents, because they involve young people and staff. Many of them, as I have said, are referred to Victoria Police, and we do not want to prejudice that process. Those investigations need to take place without political interference. But we will continue to support our staff.

You asked a question about what we are doing. We have a number of initiatives in place at Cherry Creek and at Parkville: individual counselling is available to staff, psychological support, peer support programs, health and safety training and reporting systems. We work collaboratively with all partners across government to ensure we have the safest possible workplaces. We work collaboratively with the industrial representatives, the union. We work collaboratively with WorkSafe. We work collaboratively with the Ombudsman. We want to make our system as safe as possible for everyone in our system. That means for the staff; it also means for the young people in custody. It means the community is kept safer. We will continue to do the work, and we have invested more than any government has previously.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:26): I think the minister is in denial. I therefore ask: Minister, young people continue to gain access to secure areas at Parkville and Cherry Creek. They overpower staff and steal access cards, putting the entire system at risk of further riots or, as we have seen in the past, revenge attacks between gangs, like the one that left a young person with life-changing injuries. Minister, I ask: why has your department denied that the serious allegations took place, and will it take a young person or staff member dying before you act and put in place security measures that guarantee the protection of hardworking staff and ensure the delivery of your duty of care to youths in detention as well?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:27): I thank Mr Davis for his supplementary question. I will not get into specifics, but what I will say is that recent incidents have been resolved safely and there have been no physical injuries to anybody. Nonetheless, understand that the majority of young people that come in contact with the criminal justice system are diverted away successfully – 95 per cent. You can look at all the statistics you like. We do a good job in Victoria of early intervention and diversion. As minister I do not decide who enters into our custodial facilities or for how long they are with us, but when they come into our custody we try addressing their behavioural issues. We make investments in addressing the underlying behaviour, which will mean we are all safer in the long term. That means the staff are safer, that means the community is safer and that means they and their families are safer, but of course it is a complex environment. We do not shy away from that. We stand together and work closely with our staff, and through our investments in infrastructure and through better training we

will continue to support the staff to make sure the system is as safe as possible. We will continue to do that work whilst you keep talking down the system. The system is in a much better place than what it was when you were last in government.

Ministers statements: emergency services

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:28): I would like to rise to update the house on the extensive work our emergency services organisations are doing to make sure that Victoria is as prepared as possible for the upcoming high-risk season. They of course do not just sit around in the winter months waiting for summer. They have been working very hard to prepare over the colder months, and just last week I took part in the annual summer emergency event exercises, where agencies from across government respond to a potential emergency event, allowing them to confirm their roles, responsibilities and State Control Centre arrangements. I was lucky enough to attend as an observer, and I can confirm to the Parliament that our agencies and departments are ready to respond to anything that they may face this season.

I would also like to welcome the amazing Life Saving Victoria to Parliament today, and I urge members to visit them upstairs in the Legislative Council committee room. They are there until 2 pm if you have not said hi already. Last week the Parliamentary Secretary for Emergency Services joined Life Saving Victoria for the official flags-up for the 2024 summer season, marking the beginning of the annual patrol season. From 9 November to 27 April volunteer and paid firefighters will raise red and yellow flags across patrolled locations, helping to keep Victorians and visitors safe at our iconic beaches and waterways.

Every drowning in our waterways is a tragedy and one too many. The message to anyone heading out to the water is pretty simple: visit a patrolled beach, swim between the red and yellow flags, read safety signs and make sure you are aware of the conditions via the Bureau of Meteorology app or the Beachsafe app. Preparedness of course is a responsibility shared between our emergency services and the community, whether it is preparing your property for a potential bushfire or checking water conditions before you swim.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:30): That ends questions and ministers statements. Minister Blandthorn will get answers to questions to the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation from Mr Ettershank in line with the standing orders and also the answer to Mrs Deeming’s question to the Minister for Education. Minister Tierney will get answers from the Minister for Outdoor Recreation – the questions from Mr Bourman – and also Minister Symes will get answers from the Premier to two questions from Mr Limbrick.

Constituency questions

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:31): (1238) My question is to the Minister for Environment in the other place. Over the past month I have been enthusiastically engaging with my constituents about Solar Victoria’s generous rebates for solar panels, heat pumps and energy storage batteries. My constituents in the Northern Metropolitan Region have been excited to hear how switching to solar can save individual households thousands of dollars on their energy bills. I am sure that we will agree that this is an invaluable measure to alleviate some cost-of-living pressures and reduce our state’s carbon emissions. One of my constituents, Zoe, raised a question about how Victoria is managing waste from solar PV panels, which I am raising again here today. My question to the minister is: what action is the Allan Labor government taking to ensure that solar products do not reach landfills at the end of their life cycles?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:32): (1239) My constituency question is to the Minister for Jobs and Industry, and it concerns the government's approach to Melbourne's tech sector and specifically the field of artificial intelligence. Many of my constituents have written to me about the importance of AI. It is unsurprising given Melbourne is home to 20 per cent of Australia's AI startups and scale-ups. I note your Parliamentary Secretary for Jobs gave a well-covered speech yesterday at the National Tech Summit, in which she said 'AI' was transforming the economy and 'AI' would underpin our future society. Can the minister inform whether the government is committed to the AI industry or whether AI, as in artificial intelligence, was really the driving force deserving the credit? Or perhaps the Parliamentary Secretary for Jobs believes AI Bakery, a fantastic Lebanese bakery chain in my electorate, will underpin our future society and growth.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:33): (1240) My question today is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and I would like to ask what provisions you have in place to ensure that people who live near the current Eastern Freeway widening works are not being exposed to dangerous silica dust as the freeway noise walls are dismantled. I have seen footage of a bulldozer breaking down these walls with another worker standing well back, quite far back, lightly hosing the area. I am concerned that this is not sufficient to prevent the silica dust particles being spread to nearby homes. These particles can cause significant lung damage as they are very small and can penetrate deep into people's lungs. Minister, please outline how nearby residents will be protected from this dangerous dust pollution.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:34): (1241) My question is to the Minister for Education. What schools in Southern Metropolitan will benefit under the current round of the planned maintenance program? In the last parliamentary sitting week I spoke about the many schools in the bayside area being supported by the state Labor government, and now we can add Beaumaris North Primary to that list. Last week Beaumaris North Primary School was set to receive more than \$500,000 under the planned maintenance program to fix some ceilings, for drainage work, for revarnishing and for roof works – an investment that will help ensure that this fantastic primary school continues to look after some great children in the bayside area. From Brighton to Cheltenham and Hampton to Sandringham, this government is investing in schools in bayside.

Northern Victoria Region

Gaëlle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:35): (1242) My question is to the Minister for Agriculture, and it is to confirm the state government's commitment to the future of the Bendigo Livestock Exchange. It is a key saleyard in regional Victoria where more than 20,000 sheep and lambs are sold every week before being transported across Australia and overseas. A new organic waste processing facility has been proposed right next door, and the City of Greater Bendigo council are expected to review the planning permit application at their next meeting. Western Composting Technology expect to process up to 30,000 tonnes of organic waste at the site each year. In June this year the EPA sought advice from Agriculture Victoria about the biosecurity risks associated with the project. Agriculture Victoria responded on 3 September in a letter outlining the biosecurity risks and included a list of questions that should set off alarm bells. Local residents have raised concerns about the risks and suitability of this proposed facility being within 150 metres of the saleyards. What assurances did Agriculture Victoria receive from the EPA to confirm the suitability of the site before they approved the application earlier this month, and will the state government confirm its commitment to the future of the Bendigo Livestock Exchange at its existing location?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:36): (1243) My question is for Minister Williams, the Minister for Public and Active Transport, about, yes, the route 800 bus, the very valuable route that runs along Dandenong Road from part of my electorate in Dandenong up through to the Monash employment and technical hub and all the way through to Chadstone.

Ingrid Stitt interjected.

Michael GALEA: Minister Stitt, yes, we are talking about buses all day. It is a very exciting upgrade that we will see come in next Sunday with the increase of service, including the rollout of Sunday services to the route 800. This is a terrific improvement for the bus. I am very much excited – I am sure Ms Payne will be as well – to take the new bus on a Sunday along with hardworking local members Eden Foster and Minister Williams herself and indeed local public transport advocates.

Bev McArthur: You're all getting on the bus.

Michael GALEA: Mrs McArthur, you invited me to get on the bus earlier today, and I would like to invite you to join me on the route 800 bus for one of its new Sunday journeys. Minister, how will these upgrades improve public transport in the south-east?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:37): (1244) My constituency question is for the Minister for Environment. The City of Casey recently approved a planning permit for a new waste transfer station adjacent to an existing landfill on Hallam Road in Hampton Park. Approval was given just days before a newly elected council took office, despite over 1000 submissions to the draft development plan, many of which were opposed to this development. The proposed waste transfer station will be located within 250 metres of homes, putting thousands of my constituents within the 500-metre buffer zone and at risk of exposure to air and noise pollution and dramatically increased traffic. So I ask: will the minister advocate for my constituents in the surrounding suburbs by opposing the establishment of a new waste transfer station on Hallam Road?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:38): (1245) My question is for the Minister for Planning. Labor's proposed planning changes will remove the rights of locals in Lang Lang to be notified of, object to and appeal against new and expanded quarries. At a recent information session residents were told that any submission they make would not be considered by the Department of Transport and Planning if it raises any issues beyond the changes alone. These planning changes will have flow-on effects to every other aspect of life in the town, including the need for the long-promised Lang Lang bypass, environmental concerns and community safety, and cannot be considered on their own. Minister, do you think it is fair that your department will not consider submissions if they raise other issues beyond the planning controls in isolation? Will you instruct them to consider each and every submission and objection, or is this all just a sham?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:39): (1246) My question is to the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC. Minister, in April this year you legislated a number of changes to WorkCover, which have resulted in hundreds of Victorians losing compensation payments. I know that residents in my electorate have had difficult experiences with their WorkCover claims. The reason provided for these changes was that WorkCover was not financially viable. However, this week WorkCover has confirmed that there was a \$389 million surplus for the last financial year. The Victorian Community and Public Sector Union secretary Karen Batt publicly said that Labor is 'profiteering' off injured Victorians and:

The financial turnaround in only a few months confirms their changes went too far ...

Minister, what support is available for people in my electorate who have been denied support merely because their injury was a mental health injury?

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (12:40): (1247) My question is for the Minister for Police regarding an ongoing pay dispute with Victoria Police, which has now dragged on for 18 months. My constituent in Sunshine expressed feeling unvalued and unappreciated by the Allan Labor government, with the government spending a staggering \$216 billion on the Suburban Rail Loop and yet hardworking police officers are not being given the pay they rightly deserve. Victoria Police are the thin blue line working tirelessly to keep Victorians safe. They deserve to be financially secure in return for their service. Could the minister please provide an update on what is being done by this government to ensure that Victoria Police receive a fair pay deal? Meanwhile the government in New South Wales secured a 40 per cent pay rise for the New South Wales police. Can the minister outline what steps are being done to resolve this issue to ensure that a fair pay deal is done for Victoria Police?

The PRESIDENT: Mr Luu, I will let that one through, but in the future it is much better, I would have thought, if you mention some of the police stations within the electorate you represent.

Trung LUU: I mentioned Sunshine.

The PRESIDENT: You did during your contribution or you are adding that now?

Trung LUU: The constituent is in Sunshine.

The PRESIDENT: Okay. That is good. Ms Copsey did it as well. It is not that hard. It would have been better. I have just let it go through. Ms Copsey, if you really tie it to your electorate to indicate maybe some police stations or something like that within the contribution, because it is a constituency question, then it makes my life easier, and I like an easy life. I am not just picking on you, Mr Luu. Ms Copsey's was, 'Some constituents in my electorate feel this.' Next year we are all going to be better, because we have hit the halfway mark, we are all practised and we are all going to be fantastic.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:42): (1248) My question is for the Minister for Water. Access to public land is a right held in the highest regard by the Libertarian Party. We recognise the rights of Victorians to access land that is held by the Crown and maintained using their taxes. It is the government's duty to ensure public lands are safe for public access and to be transparent when limiting access to them. Residents of the Timbertop estate in Rowville regularly use the walking tracks in the Tirhatuan wetlands to gain access to essential facilities across the wetlands such as Mulgrave hospital, Rosewood Downs Primary School and public transport hubs. Melbourne Water recently closed the only track connecting these two halves of the police paddocks due to safety concerns. When residents asked what these concerns were, they were given vague and unsatisfactory responses by Melbourne Water. Minister, what are the safety concerns which led Melbourne Water to close the walking tracks in this area, and when can they expect access to be restored?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:43): (1249) My question for the Minister for Police is further to my question last sitting week. Minister, I asked about what police will do to restore public confidence in the safety of Geelong streets. Today I want to expand this question on behalf of my Geelong constituents and ask about the statewide approach to knife crime. Jayme 'Chugs' Sykes's family have begun a petition. As they wrote to me:

Our mission ... is to raise awareness that carrying a knife is a coward's move, we want to see tougher knife crime laws, more robust sentencing and prison terms for carrying a knife. Swifter sentencing and giving Police more power to deal with knife crime and then education in schools to raise the point that you should Carry Respect Not a KNIFE!

Minister, were your recent changes, which did not even ban machetes, enough to avoid another tragedy like this?

The PRESIDENT: Sorry, Mrs McArthur, did you refer to a tragedy in your electorate?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, in Geelong.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:44): (1250) My question is for the Minister for Education. Vermont South Special School in my electorate is a very valuable institution that supports 140 students with mild intellectual disabilities, and they have long offered a two-week swimming program funded by the Department of Education. This program is essential for teaching life-saving swimming skills but has been disrupted since 2020 due to the lockdowns and the inability to return to a previous venue and a lack of alternative venues in the region. Despite the strong efforts of the school's outstanding principal Jane Henderson and the school council, Vermont South Special School has been unable to secure a suitable venue for its swimming program and has had to suspend it, and attempts elsewhere have failed. Given the importance of water safety, especially in Australia, can the minister advise what support or alternatives might be provided to ensure Vermont South Special School students regain access to life-saving swimming programs?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): (1251) My question is for the Minister for Housing. This week I was contacted by a constituent Geoff, who lives in a flat in Greeves Street, St Kilda, under a tenancy agreement with community housing provider HousingFirst. In his email to me he explains that there are a number of flats in this complex that have been set aside for social housing. When I spoke with Geoff he told me that he and his neighbours are now very concerned that some of these flats that are designed for older low-income earners are being put up for sale when residents were led to believe their tenancies were permanent. He said:

None of the tenants have had any advice of this action and the proposed sale is causing serious concern about our tenure. I have been consulting with several other tenants regarding this message.

They are very anxious about what might be proposed. My question for the minister is: can the minister explain why social housing is being sold off, creating uncertainty for these residents and reducing access to affordable housing?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:47): (1252) My question is to the Minister for Ambulance Services. Last Friday afternoon, on 8 November, there was a collision of a single vehicle into a tree outside my office. The driver had apparently suffered a medical episode, very similar I guess to what has happened recently with the tragic incident with the truck that went through the childcare centre, killing a mother and injuring a child. This situation only impacted the driver, and the driver was unconscious but breathing. Bystanders rendered as much assistance as they could and within a relatively short time two police vehicles arrived and took charge of the scene. However, it took more than 15 minutes for an ambulance to arrive and render first aid to the unconscious driver. Yesterday even my mother had to go by ambulance and again it took time. Minister, when will you fix the ambulance mess in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, providing more paramedics with better situations and more opportunities so that we can save lives and assist Victorians in a timely manner?

Sitting suspended 12:48 pm until 2:02 pm.

*Motions***Mental health services**

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:02): I am pleased to be able to rise and move this motion in my name that addresses some of the issues around mental health and the concerns that many Victorians are experiencing. I move:

That this house, pursuant to part 9.6 of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022:

- (1) refers the status and outcomes of the implementation of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, including:
 - (a) the current status of implementation of all recommendations contained in the interim and final reports, including recommendations the government have reported as complete;
 - (b) the impact of delays and the implementation of recommendations on workforce and access to mental health care in Victoria's public mental health system since the royal commission handed down its interim and final reports;
 - (c) a detailed analysis of the impact of delays and the implementation of recommendations on access to and wait times for mental health support in community and inpatient settings;
 - (d) the impact of delays and the implementation of recommendations on the mental health workforce, including:
 - (i) changes to the quantum and composition of the mental health workforce by profession and those with lived experience;
 - (ii) current areas of workforce shortages by worker category and geographical region;
 - (iii) mental health worker satisfaction;
 - (iv) capacity of the current mental health workforce and supporting infrastructure to meet demand for mental health services in Victoria;
 - (e) inclusion of people with lived and living experience on the implementation of recommendations, including responding to past harm in the mental health system;
 - (f) detailed examination, audit and reporting of expenditure of the mental health levy and assessment as to whether this expenditure is in line with legislative requirements;
 - (g) any other relevant matter; and
- (2) requests that the commission complete its report by March 2026.

The reason it refers to March 2026 is because of course that will be five years since March 2021, when the interim report was first handed down. Since that time significant issues have arisen out of the royal commission, and whilst it was lauded by the former Premier and the government as a once-in-a-generation-type issue and something that must be fixed – 'We've got to fix the broken system' – there were lots of comments around it. Mr Andrews, the then Premier, described the mental health system as fundamentally broken, and there were many comments from members of the government that this was the most important reform work of anywhere in the nation. I think there was a lot of support from right across the political spectrum in relation to –

Melina Bath interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: There was a lot of goodwill, Ms Bath, around fixing the system. It was clearly identified that there were challenges within the system and that it needed to have the focus of a royal commission to understand exactly what was happening, what was occurring and what needed to be done, and of course the royal commission undertook that very important work. But since that time there have been failures by the government to deliver on that promise to fix that broken system, and years have gone by now where the government said they would support all the recommendations, and yet that has not been done. That is why I read the full motion into this debate – because there are so many issues around what is going on. The people within the system – those stakeholders, those with lived experience and the very many concerned Victorians – are continually raising why the system

remains broken, and the government have not been able to deliver on the promise as they told Victorians they would do.

There is no question that mental health services in Victoria are in crisis and, as I have said, that the Allan Labor government has failed to deliver on its promise to fix a broken system and to fix that crisis. In the acute system mental health-related presentations to Victorian emergency departments – that is, emergency departments within the acute system – have surged to a five-year high, with an average of 2184 Victorians seeking help every single week. That is putting enormous pressure on a very stretched system, and it just cannot cope. Less than half of those Victorians that are seeking that care and management and support, just over 48 per cent, are seen within 8 hours of presenting to an emergency department. You can imagine that for someone in a very highly agitated state or for someone very significantly unwell with mental illness presenting like that, those hours can really build; they are very significant for someone who is very unwell. That is a scandal, that there are so many people that are not being seen within appropriate timeframes. These are very vulnerable Victorians who are being failed by the mental health system and by the government because they have not been able to get that appropriate care at a time when they need it most. That is reflective of a system in crisis.

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System made it very clear that Victoria's mental health system required urgent reform, and it was, as I have mentioned, Labor that made the bold promises to fix a broken system. More than a third of the royal commission's recommendations have either been abandoned or indefinitely delayed or have not even started. So what this motion does is go to the heart of what is at the core of the government's failures. It is asking the house to support an independent inquiry into the status of the implementation of the royal commission's recommendations. It is very simple: it is an independent inquiry to look at why the recommendations have not been able to be implemented. As I said, more than a third have either been abandoned or indefinitely delayed or have not even started.

Recommendation 69, which is one that has been spoken about and has been reported on and which I will come back to, really highlights the frustration of some of the people who are directly impacted by the system and who are working in it. They feel like the Allan Labor government has let them down. The government claim to have acted on 90 per cent of these recommendations, but when you actually look at the reality of what is happening and all the government's own reporting in actual fact in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee back in May, the evidence does not match their rhetoric. We know that they have an ability to somewhat stretch the truth on what is actually happening here in Victoria. We see it with a whole range of statistics and issues that arise. We see that through a lack of transparency and accountability on financial matters, on decisions and policies that have been made, and we have seen it with this royal commission.

As I mentioned, the acute health system is under so much pressure. Again, where are the annual reports for the acute health system? We do not get that transparency and accountability from this government. We have not got those annual reports, and the acute health system is under enormous pressure. In fact the government is amalgamating services by stealth. Letters are going out, and they are starting to talk about what they will be doing: 'Take it or leave it; you've only got a certain period of time to make a decision, otherwise they'll come over the top.' I have said this on many occasions: a big, centralised health system is not the right way to go, and this is what this government does. It is big government, it is big taxing, and it goes hand in hand with the shockingly appalling big debt that they are leaving generations of Victorians with. Emergency departments are overwhelmed and services are underfunded and overstretched at the moment, and we know that the priorities of the government are all wrong when we look at the hundreds of billions of dollars going into the rail tunnel in the south-east suburbs, whereas these services and these issues that need to be addressed are not being met.

That is why we need to know exactly where the Allan Labor government are in terms of fulfilling these recommendations, especially those ones they claim to have been completed, because that is not what is being actually said is the reality on the ground. I have mentioned the huge debt that Victoria is going to be saddled with because of the mismanagement by this government, but this motion also calls

for a detailed audit of the mental health levy, which raises over a billion dollars each year from Victorian businesses, many of whom are struggling to meet the costs of operating in this state.

I mentioned in the house yesterday a business owner in Mulgrave. They have had that business for 31 years and employ 15 people, and they are finding it just too hard to do business in this state. Whether it is the WorkCover premiums, the payroll tax they have got to pay, the utility costs that are going up and up and up, wages costs, the consumable costs – all of those costs are going up. They have got levies like the mental health levy, which applies to large businesses, but these levies and taxes are actually really impacting businesses, whether they are small, medium or large corporates. This levy, obviously, does apply to larger corporates, but it is just the decision that they have to make if it is getting too hard for businesses to actually operate in this state, and that could be a small, medium or large corporation. They are certainly saying the costs in this state are prohibitive to be able to undertake business, and that is what we on this side of the house are extremely concerned about with increasing taxes and what is happening.

With the billion dollars each year that is recouped from business, this levy was specifically designed to support the royal commission's recommendations and drive that real reform in the mental health system. But despite raising over \$1.1 billion, I think it was, in the last business year, we continue to see delays in vital services like the establishment of local mental health hubs. The government has failed on that. That was supposed to alleviate pressure on emergency departments and enable people to have greater access to care. The government has failed on that. It is \$1.1 billion. This is a huge sum of money, so where is that money going to? Where has it gone? When I came into this place, we were talking about the desal plant and we were shocked at the couple of million dollars that that was costing taxpayers, and now we just let this billion dollars roll off our tongue like it is millions of dollars. This is significant money, and the government cannot account for it – \$1.1 billion. That is why we need to see where that money has gone. That is why we need a detailed audit. We need the transparency. We need the accountability.

Victorian taxpayers, who are paying this money to the government, deserve to understand where their taxes are going to. This is just something that is complete anathema to Labor. They do not get it. They do not respect taxpayers. They do not understand the enormity of the pressures that they are under, and they have got no ability to manage the money that they are demanding, whether it is this mental health levy, whether it is the death duties that are being applied, whether it is land tax, whether it is a whole range of taxes. We have had 56 new or increased taxes since Labor came to government and have been in power over the last 10 years, and that is anti-competitive.

Whilst business and Victorians understand the responsibility to support a system that may be broken, such as the mental health system, they also deserve to understand how that money is being spent, because they know this government wastes and mismanages taxpayers money on a regular basis. It happens day in, day out. This is not something that should be objected to by those that are not supporting this motion, the government and some of the crossbench who are not supporting this motion. Surely you as elected representatives have a responsibility in this place to understand where the \$1.1 billion collected last year that is meant to be going towards fixing this broken system has gone. That is what this motion is asking for, to have that audit be undertaken.

This motion goes to the heart of another aspect which the government has failed to do. They talk it up big. They put out their shiny little media releases and say, 'We're doing this, and we're doing that,' and that is building the mental health workforce. They have failed on that too. They say they will do it, but they cannot deliver it, and they have not delivered it. Surely we should understand exactly what is going wrong, what they are getting right and what they are not getting right, and that is why this commission will look at that aspect, because one of those aspects around part (1)(d) of the motion is the impact of delays and the implementation of recommendations on the mental health workforce, including those aspects which I read out previously, is really critical for the mental health service to be operating in the capacity that it should.

The royal commission recommended creating 800 new mental health jobs to address workforce shortages and improve service delivery. The Allan Labor government has failed to deliver on this commitment, heaping pressure on our existing mental health workforce, who are leaving the sector in droves. The motion asks that the Allan Labor government be held accountable, as I said, for its failure to implement the royal commission's recommendation to establish legislated regional mental health boards. It does a number of other things. These boards were intended to give local communities more control and ensure services were tailored to their needs. What has the Allan Labor government done in response? They have quietly removed references to these boards from government websites and have failed to legislate them, choosing instead to continue with interim bodies that lack the authority needed for real accountability. That is what is wrong here. That is what is going on.

Our motion calls for the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission to undertake an independent inquiry into the implementation of the royal commission's recommendations. The inquiry should include an assessment of whether the Allan Labor government has fulfilled its promise regarding the mental health levy, an audit of its expenditure and a thorough examination of how delays have impacted workforce capacity, access to mental health care and service delivery right across Victoria.

In the last few minutes I want to say a number of other things that have been reported. Simon Katterl, who has been a great advocate for those with mental ill health, spoke about the budget and spoke about his concerns. As he said:

Labor promised to fix our mental health crisis. I made the mistake of believing them.

They are powerful words.

For many, seeing the premier promise change bred hope for transformation across the system. Among the accepted recommendations were new services, new agencies, a desperately needed boost to funding via the Mental Health Levy, and a new way of thinking about, preventing, and responding to the growing mental health crisis.

He and others have been let down. He went on to say:

Fast forward to today, and how is the government tracking? They have delivered the "bleakest budget" yet for mental health, failed to ensure paramedics rather than police were the first responders to mental health callouts, failed to establish a lived-experience agency, opened just 15 of the promised 50 community-based centres, and indefinitely delayed the rollout of the remaining 35 centres.

These are his words. He is somebody that is very widely respected, very well regarded, and he wrote those words just a few weeks ago because he feels let down, like so many others do. That is why this motion is so important.

I would urge members to think about what we are doing here. It is ensuring that the government are actually doing what they have said they will do. It is understanding where the \$1.1 billion so far has gone and the billions that they will reap in the years to come will go. How can we trust this government if we do not have that accountability and transparency? We need it. We need to understand that, and we are asking for the commission to undertake this work – an independent authority to do the work that is required. I urge all members to come into the chamber and support this important motion.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (14:23): It is a real pleasure to rise to speak on this motion that has been put forward by Ms Crozier. It is an opportunity for me I hope in the time that I have got to set the record straight and talk about the significant amount of work that our government is delivering and the work that is underway to provide Victorians with the mental health support that they need. I think I have said in this place more times than I can count that the Allan Labor government is absolutely committed to delivering on every single one of the royal commission's recommendations, and that has been backed in by record investment, the largest in Australia's history. I will come back to some of the issues around the levy shortly.

This is a bold reform agenda. It is very obvious that it is complex work and cannot be achieved overnight, and that is why the commission set out a very ambitious 10-year horizon. Of course that work has been complicated by a one-in-100-year pandemic, which has placed unprecedented pressure on our health services, and the mental health acute services have not been immune to that. We understand the pressure on our emergency departments, and we are acting on that in a number of ways, which I will touch on in my contribution. But we are not going to shy away from these challenges. In the years since the final report was handed down we have done a lot of things that we should be proud of in terms of the new services that have been delivered to the community so far.

I want to just touch briefly on some of the significant foundational reforms. They are the reforms that are driving the cultural change that is needed across the sector. We have developed and commenced the new Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022, and that was accompanied by guidance material for our mental health services and our workforce. We have legislated the role of the chief officer for mental health and wellbeing. We have established the Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing. We have established the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, the subject of this motion, which I will talk to shortly. We have reduced the use of restrictive practices in line with mental health improvement programs, towards the elimination of restrictive practices. We have implemented nonlegal advocacy for people who are at risk of or are receiving compulsory treatment. We have mandated cultural safety training in health services. We have funded infant, child and youth area mental health and wellbeing services and supported cultural safety training. We have commenced a program of capital works, which is about providing vulnerable consumers in the system with intensive care areas.

We are also delivering better services and better treatment. We have supported over 12,000 consumers across 15 new mental health and wellbeing locals. It is very easy for those opposite to take cheap shots at us, but the reality is that they are 12,000 people who would not have had a choice prior to these locals being rolled out. They would have to either front up to an emergency department or go to their GP and have the means to pay hundreds of dollars to see a private psychologist or psychiatrist.

We have delivered the first specialist women's mental health service. We have delivered the first child and family centre and three new children's locals. We have delivered eight family-led mental health and wellbeing connect centres. We have delivered 179 new mental health acute beds, including Hospital in the Home. We have got the new statewide trauma service, transforming Trauma Victoria. We have commenced work to double the capacity of Victoria's YPARCs, which are our youth prevention and recovery centres, and we have delivered the North West Women's Prevention and Recovery Care Centre. We have delivered on key royal commission recommendations for the statewide suicide prevention and response strategy. We have been working closely with our Aboriginal-led health services to deliver healing centres, and that work is quite rightly being led by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and the Balit Durn Durn Centre.

In terms of emergency departments, Ms Crozier mentioned these issues. We have delivered the Sunshine Hospital, University Hospital Geelong, St Vincent's Hospital, Monash, the Royal Children's, Frankston and Latrobe Regional, and there are projects up and running for the Ballarat Base Hospital, Bendigo and Shepparton. The Northern, the new Footscray Hospital and the new Melton Hospital will all have mental health hubs in their emergency departments as an alternative for people waiting for mental health beds. This is really important reform. Of course we are focused on people presenting at our emergency departments in acute mental health distress.

I could go on about what we have done all day, but I want to use the time that I have got left, which is short, to talk about the motion and importantly the establishment of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission. We established that commission – it was a key recommendation of the royal commission – and it commenced operating alongside the new act on 1 September 2023. The commission has a nation-leading leadership model. They have dedicated commissioners that are responsible for lived experience for both consumers and carers. The commission supports and promotes the leadership of people with lived experience through its work.

A key part of its role in the transformed mental health and wellbeing system as an entity – and this is important – is that it ensures accountability for delivering on a record investment made by the Victorian government. The new commission has substantial additional powers to obtain and share data, investigate complaints, begin inquiries and report on the performance, quality and safety of the mental health and wellbeing system. And the commission has powers under the act to hold the Victorian government to account for the performance, quality and safety of the mental health and wellbeing system, including monitoring the implementation of the royal commission recommendations. This is a key part of their remit.

As an independent agency, they should not be the subject of political stunts in this place. They should be allowed to continue with their work. They have been in their establishment phase. They have been operating for only just over 12 months. They have been setting up the fundamentals in the short time that they have been operating. They are keen to focus on building the organisation, the structure and the new enhanced agency. This importantly includes transferring the old Mental Health Complaints Commission work over to the new commission. They are developing a lived experience plan, and they are developing a monitoring and reporting plan outlining how the commission will monitor and report on the mental health and wellbeing system and the government's implementation of the royal commission recommendations. They are doing exactly what this motion calls on them to do. In the first 12 months of their operation their resources should not be redirected to perform a sort of quasi research function for the opposition. They should be concentrating on the important work of supporting the mental health system, handling complaints and holding the government to account, and they have all of the powers and independence they need to be able to do that.

I want to quickly talk about the mental health levy. Although Ms Crozier was giving a small business example when she was talking about it, it is important to note that this levy only applies to businesses with a national payroll of more than \$10 million a year.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, Acting President – do not verbal me, Minister – I did mention that to say the hardship of businesses, but I said corporations were paying this levy. I was saying it was hard for businesses, whether they are small, medium or large, so do not verbal me.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): There is no point of order.

Ingrid STITT: The mental health levy will continue to be dedicated solely to mental health services spending, as is required under the legislation. It is a hypothecated fund. It is estimated that the levy will collect more than a billion dollars in the 2024–25 year, and if those opposite were not too lazy to look at the budget papers they would know that our output funding is just shy of \$3 billion this year and our investment continues at pace. The reality is that our government is absolutely focused on making sure that the Victorian community gets the benefits of both the levy, the increased investment and the additional services that implementing the royal commission's work will deliver.

This is all about politics. The fact that they want to report back on 20 March 2026 tells you everything you need to know about the motivation behind this motion. This is all about talking down this vital sector. Our government is absolutely focused on continuing to deliver for the Victorian people as we committed to doing when we accepted every recommendation of the royal commission, and I urge all members of the chamber to reject this cheap stunt.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:33): I am pleased to rise to speak on the motion put forward by Ms Crozier, motion 704:

That this house, pursuant to part 9.6 of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022:

refers the status and outcomes of the implementation of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission ...

It goes through a number of those dot points and:

requests that the commission complete its report by March 2026.

I think it is a rather sad indictment on the government. A body with capability, with investment and with expertise that has been set up as part of the royal commission now should be able to investigate comprehensively how the royal commission's recommendations are or are not being rolled out, how they can positively impact Victorian lives and, if it is not working, what is not working and what needs to be addressed. These are fair and reasonable questions that this government should be supporting.

When we think about mental health, there are so many significant issues that are happening right across Victoria and also particularly in my Eastern Victoria electorate and region. Over the past nine years that I have been in Parliament I have heard some heartbreaking stories from parents, families and loved ones about not only acute and very pointed mental health issues but also long-term conditions that can start off with anxiety and depression, can emanate from domestic violence or sexual abuse or can precipitate cognitive decline. You can have certainly clinically diagnosed conditions and genetic diseases and also of course the scourge, very sadly, of drug addiction and alcohol. All of these are real and horrible nightmares to many people in our Victorian state.

I was there for the big fanfare of the launch of the royal commission report. It was in the Royal Exhibition Building. It was absolutely a floor show. We all went with hope and the promise that the government would actually turn Victoria's crippled mental health system around, but some years on we are still suffering very badly.

Mental Health Victoria has raised many concerns about the fact that Victorians are still receiving inadequate mental health and wellbeing care. That is certainly in their budget submission put out only this month. We also know that the commissioners have flagged with the government their concern around Labor's failure to implement the royal commission recommendations in the state budget response. I am quoting from their opening page, where they said to the government:

We understand there is particular frustration regarding the lack of funding for Recommendation 29 – the establishment of a new agency led by people with lived experience of mental illness or psychological distress.

The government has also slowed its rollout of the Local Hubs, and The Healing Place was unsuccessful in its bid to fund the first iteration of a consumer-led community residential service as part of Interim Recommendation 5.

Then it goes on to say:

While the 2024–25 State budget does include some positive initiatives, several key reforms have been delayed and many stakeholders are left with unanswered questions. Some have asked whether the mental health reform is still a priority for this government.

Certainly that is the feeling that many people in my electorate also have when they are struggling to access services. Indeed I was speaking to one of my very good services in Traralgon only today. In the conversation I asked her to provide to me three key things that she wanted the government to know about and understand, and she just said in our region, in Gippsland, Eastern Victoria Region, it is the accessibility of services. She said that they are chronically overworked and understaffed, that there are insufficient services, insufficient operators, and that many of them have closed their waiting lists. They are so full that they just cannot deal with any more people. Those people who are on the other side of that waiting list still have these issues – they still are suffering from mental ill health, they still have crippling conditions – yet this continues to pervade. The government also, she said, needs to understand it is not only the people with the affliction, with the condition, with the mental health issues, but also the carers of those people. One particular organisation, Wellways in Latrobe Valley, has got over 500 carers on its books at the moment, who are struggling with the burden. It is the next flow-on effect. The system is not supporting them, and it falls back on family members, carers and loved ones.

She also wanted to acknowledge very much the importance of those people with neurodivergence – with autism or ADHD – and ensuring that they have better services, better understanding and better supply. We know that in our school systems many students come in, and while it is not the principals' fault, they struggle to access the services that they need. We certainly heard that in the inquiry into education. One of the principals from Latrobe Valley said to me that there are more kids coming in in

a greater state of anxiety than ever before and they are having to try and calm them and stem them in order for them to learn. If you have an addled, distressed and anxious brain, there is no learning available to you. These are some of the real things.

We have certainly heard that the government has deferred the establishment of 35 of those wellbeing hubs, many of them in regional Victoria. I will go to the point on education, and I commend our shadow minister Emma Kealy for the work she has been doing over many years. I remember she put out a private members bill on mental health practitioners in schools, and the government said, 'No, no. What a stupid idea.' A couple of years later, in a fair desperate state, they implemented those mental health practitioners in schools, again understanding that they are not able to keep up with the supply for our vulnerable students. Thank you to Emma for the work that she has done in that space.

I also want to talk about alcohol and drug dependency and the importance of when people come into the system who are desperate and have made that decision to come off. They have had enough. They have lost their family, they have lost their friends and they know it is the time to change. The government has rolled out youth drug rehabilitation centres, and there is one near Traralgon not far from my office, but that goes to 26. What happens if you make that decision after 26? Quite often you have not burnt everybody until that time. I know during our campaign we were offering and made a commitment to 180 new beds being delivered at six different locations across regional Victoria, Latrobe Valley being one of them and Melbourne. That is another part of this issue: the government seems to just be failing to support our regional and rural Victorians.

I happened to be in my local Latrobe Regional Hospital the other day with my son with his condition. I did not say who I was. I just sat and observed for a number of visits, and those staff, wherever they may be, were doing an outstanding job. This was not in the mental health system, but you can see how busy all of those staff are in our hospitals and that they are not getting that early intervention. Some of the parts where we should be looking at early intervention are our local community health centres and how they can impact with the work that they can do. Yet we had a meeting with them recently, and they feel like they are getting squeezed and squeezed and squeezed by this government. I urge the members in this house: this is a reasonable motion. It is about an investigation, an audit, accountability and transparency, and that is what we should be accepting and voting for today.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:43): I also rise to speak on motion 704 on the notice paper, relating to an inquiry into mental health in Victoria. I cannot talk about mental health in Victoria without talking about what happened during the pandemic, which has probably been one of the biggest harms to mental health that anyone has seen in living memory at least. I think it also needs to be pointed out that many of these harms were caused by the government themselves, and I still cannot believe some of the things that were done, especially to children, during the pandemic and the subsequent harms.

We are only just starting to see some of these long-term effects that were caused by locking children up for years, taking them away from their friends and from their environment, locking them up unnaturally 24/7 with their families. At the time the only contact that many of these kids had with their friends and stuff was through Zoom meetings or social media, and now the government has decided that social media is harmful and it is going to take it away from kids, even though that was the only way that they could communicate. It is just crazy. I am hearing about all sorts of long-term harms, things like school refusal – kids that after lockdowns never went back to school. They never went back. They refused to. There are lots of kids like that – kids that developed anxiety disorders and all sorts of problems. The recent COVID inquiry has vindicated those of us who argued that shutting down the schools was an extreme response. Children were never at serious risk from COVID. Frankly, I think one day in the future the state of Victoria needs to apologise to children. My only hope is that these children remember what the government did to them, because it was absolutely horrible.

I will tell you something that I saw. I saw a child, a 16-year-old boy, whose parents thought that he was old enough to make his own decision about whether to have the COVID vaccine. This young man

is a very smart young man and he decided to weigh up all the probabilities and all of this sort of stuff about the COVID vaccine and he came to what he thought was a rational decision to not have it. One day he wanted to go into a JB Hi-Fi – everyone knows that kids love it; there are games, there are PlayStations and stuff in there. His father had to say to him, ‘They’re not going to let you in that store. You’re not allowed to go in there anymore.’ This child is going to remember that for the rest of his life.

I will tell you about another thing that happened. In 2021 there were a whole bunch of children like this in Victoria. I do not know how many; probably thousands, maybe millions, I do not know. There were a lot of children like this. For Christmas no-one could have a Christmas party. You were not allowed to have a party indoors. You had to show your code saying that you were vaccinated. A good friend of mine went to a special effort to get a paddock on a farm, and he had all these rides and stalls set up so these children who had been ostracised from society by the government could at least have a Christmas party, and they had Santa. One wonders: what are the long-term mental health harms to these kids? The only silver lining in all this that I can see is that one day these kids will be sceptical of the state and will be sceptical of government action, because some of these things that were done to them by the government were absolutely horrendous. I think one day in the future the state of Victoria will need to apologise for what was done to these kids.

I saw many other mental health problems. In fact my office was inundated with them during the pandemic. People who had been divorced and were isolated from their children, marriage breakdowns because of being locked inside 24/7, family violence – all of these sorts of issues –

A member interjected.

David LIMBRICK: I have not forgotten, that is for sure. But today I am in this very unenviable position, which frankly I am quite angry about. I have been given this motion which looks like it might be good, but I have not had enough time to talk to anyone in the sector about this. I want the government’s mission to be to fix mental health in Victoria and the commission’s role to be to monitor the government’s rollout. I want them to succeed in that. I want things to get better, but I do not know if this is a good use of resources. I do not know if this is going to interfere with other work that they are doing, because that is the last thing in the world that I want to do.

I am in this very unenviable position where I cannot honestly stand here and say that I have given this due consideration and this is a good course of action, because I am absolutely terrified of doing something that might interfere with this and wreck it and make things worse, which I do not want to do. I am in this unenviable position where I cannot honestly stand here and say that I think this is good. I am going to be forced to oppose it, and I feel quite angry about that. Anyway, that is my position. The Libertarian Party will not be supporting this motion.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (14:50): I am pleased to rise and make a contribution on Ms Crozier’s motion referring certain matters arising from the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, the details of which are in the motion itself. I will not go through them; they have been articulated in the course of the debate. I am really proud to be part of a government that has taken mental health seriously and that has done so much over the last few years in particular both to put a focus on the needs of Victorians with mental health injuries who are in need of mental health support but also to invest in the mental health system, to take the time and use the powers of a royal commission to investigate the challenges that this exceptionally important issue in our community faces.

I think it says a lot about the significance with which the Labor government treats the mental health of Victorians and the adequacy of the mental health system that we dedicated the time and resources to ask a royal commission to come up with a series of recommendations to help us fix it, and that is exactly what the report of Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System delivered in 2021, a landmark reform road map. We are making huge inroads into that road map. The Minister for Mental Health, in her contributions and in her everyday work, is furthering us along the path of reform and

investment that was laid out in that royal commission road map. The task that has been ahead of this minister and ahead of this government since the report of that royal commission has been to rebuild the mental health system from the ground up, and that is exactly what we are doing. We are rebuilding the mental health system from the ground up. We are supporting the mental health workforce. We have not wasted a day in delivering on our commitment to implement those recommendations. Work is underway on over 90 per cent of those recommendations following a \$6 billion investment in mental health services. As the minister outlined, because of that work that is ongoing, that investment that is ongoing, the government is not supporting the motion here today.

One of the things that is quite clear in a broad range of health and human services systems but in mental health even more particularly is that achieving better outcomes for Victorians who need support with their mental health rests on having a strong mental health workforce, a mental health workforce with the right skills, with the right training and with the right resources, dedicated to supporting Victorians and their mental health needs. I know, and I know thanks to the important advocacy work of their union, because I have met many of the dedicated mental health workers here in this state. I want to take this moment in this place to acknowledge the exceptional work that they do in providing support services and also to acknowledge the tireless work of their union in advocating for them.

Because of the significance of the workforce, it has been a focus of our efforts. More than \$600 million has been invested since 2021 by the Victorian government to stabilise and grow and support and retain those in our mental health workforce. That is the biggest dedicated investment in the mental health workforce in Victoria in this state's history, and the investment is working. Between 2021 and 2023 we added an additional 1700 full-time equivalent roles to the mental health and wellbeing system, a 17 per cent increase, far and away above the historical averages in this space. Things like nursing, lived-experience workers, psychology, social work, occupational therapy and other allied health workforces. We know the tightness of the broader labour market. We know the difficulties many different sectors which rely on people to deliver services have had with their workforce in recent years, so I think you can take some solace in the significance of the dedication of this government in delivering for this workforce, that in that workforce climate this workforce is growing.

We are not going to stop there. A total of 2500 new early-career roles have been funded across the mental health sector between 2023 and 2026, and our most recent budget continues the work by investing \$15.8 million to develop a dedicated workforce pipeline for the mental health and wellbeing local services. We know that graduate programs are important in making sure that those who come out of study and enter the workforce and have those first few daunting experiences as professionals have support during that time to make sure that they are scaffolded and supported to stay in the profession so they can further develop their knowledge and skills and confidence in the job and stay with it. Graduate programs are the most well-established entry pathway into the system, and the royal commission specifically recommended expanding graduate programs in its interim report, saying that expanding graduate programs will develop an expanded pipeline of well-trained and well-supported graduates. The royal commission noted that the graduate programs are an effective way of attracting a younger workforce and allowing more experienced workers to support, educate and inspire younger workers. What we know is that if you get through the first year you are more likely to stay, so we are boosting support in that first year for graduate workers so that these workers can continue on in the system where they are absolutely needed.

I want to spend a moment talking about the lived-experience workforce, and again I had the opportunity to meet with some lived-experience workers who visited the Parliament in recent months. The government understands the absolute importance of the lived-experience workforce in our mental health and wellbeing system. Since 2020–21 we have invested over \$50 million in programs to provide education and training, career pathways and practice supports for the lived-experience workers, and we saw almost 70 per cent growth in lived-experience workers in the area mental health services between 2021 and 2023. Our investments – Labor's investments – in the lived-experience workforce are being used to grow and develop the peer workforce. To offer that, there are appropriate, critical

and safe supports for people who have walked in the same shoes as those they are seeking to help. Again, we are including in this suite of investments a peer cadet program supporting community mental health organisations to run 12-month cadetships; the lived- and living-experience workforce development program, which is providing training, supervision, support and career pathways in partnerships with around nine different agencies; and there are some leadership development grants and tertiary scholarships to develop emerging and established leaders in the workforce. We know how important the lived-experience workforce is to supporting those in the mental health system, and that is why we have backed them with this nation-leading investment.

Victoria has a range of services. There are some really significant and important services based in Southern Metropolitan Region, including the intensive mobile youth outreach services in Moorabbin. I do not have a lot of time left on the clock, Acting President Berger, so I cannot get into how important those are in detail, but I think you and I both know that across Southern Metro there are a range of fantastic mental health and wellbeing services. They are run by some fabulous staff. We can always do more. This government is doing a great deal to support the mental health and wellbeing of Victorians, and I commend the minister and the government for that investment in the progress on the reform journey.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:00): I also rise today to speak on this particular motion by the leader in the upper house for the opposition, Ms Georgie Crozier, and I commend her for the hard work that she has put in in putting together a very fair and reasonable motion, because we are concerned in opposition, and in fact it is our role in opposition to hold this government to account. This particular motion on mental health has been prepared because we do not have the transparency or the accountability that is required from this government and we do not have it in particular in this area of mental health. In fact, as Ms Crozier pointed out, about \$1.1 billion is collected from businesses that is supposed to be driven into mental health reform. Well, where is this money going? We do not know. We cannot see it because this government is not releasing reports. It is not telling us where it is going, and therefore it is trying to hide something. Because we know we have problems. I represent the South Eastern Metropolitan Region. I can tell you that mental health issues are through the roof in so many areas in my region, which of course covers 11 electorates. It is through the roof, and people are requiring services.

Why do we have problems with mental health? Well, this government needs to take a good look at itself, because we all know that the lockdowns caused all sorts of problems for young people and old people alike in isolation for long periods of time. I can tell you that the day that they put tape around the parks and told children that it was not safe for them to go and play we developed significant mental health and fear in a whole lot of young people that have not yet recovered. You only have to go down and talk to a few teachers at any point in time and you will hear about maybe five or six kids in each classroom that are suffering from mental ill health in some schools; in other schools there might be two or three in each classroom. We are not talking across the year level; we are talking about in each classroom. In some cases that is nearly a third of the class that has mental health issues. So the requirements of this government are significant, and it is not showing us where all that money is going. It is not right to be taking this money from businesses that are giving it in good faith – and because they have to – to this government for the issues of mental health. We cannot see where it is going. There is not that transparency. It is a failing government, and it continues to fail in the area of mental health – fail, fail, fail. The only thing that they can pat themselves on the back for is that they actually increased mental ill health in this state significantly.

In my area it is appalling to see what has happened to so many people and so many families that have been broken as a result of mental ill health. It is not funny; it is a very serious situation. Anybody that thinks that this is a laughable moment is just totally underestimating the impact that mental ill health is having on families. It is having a significant impact, and it does not just impair the person that has the mental ill health, it impairs every family member in that home and it impairs the community. It is a really, really serious issue.

I can tell you that in the south-east alone around 130,000 people are experiencing a mental health condition. That is nearly one in 10 residents. I can honestly say that I know many people right now in my region who are having to deal with mental ill health, and at all different levels. You can be an employed person who then has to stop being employed. You can be a child who just simply does not want to go to school. Let us think about school refusal in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region as a result of mental health issues. It is significant. I mean, I have given the data in this house before. We know for instance that 40 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds in Victoria are reporting a mental health disorder, up 50 per cent in the three years since 2021. We know that in my area alone, let us just take the City of Casey, it is up more than 50 per cent since 2019. There is a dramatic increase in school absenteeism, and that is largely linked to mental health. I should qualify that the statistic of over 50 per cent is for the school refusal; the largest percentage of that is linked to mental health issues.

We have a number of issues that we need to deal with and we are not dealing with. I find it appalling that we can have people saying, 'I don't know whether we should be spending money on looking at this in a commission.' Are you kidding me? Over \$1 billion is coming in in revenue to this government from businesses to be spent on mental health. Let us just have a look at just one section of this motion. Let us take a look at (1)(f), for instance. This is what it is asking for in this motion, and this is what people will be voting against if they vote against this motion:

- (f) detailed examination, audit and reporting of expenditure of the mental health levy and assessment as to whether this expenditure is in line with legislative requirements;

We do not even know if it is in line with the requirements when they take that levy from the businesses. We have no idea. Why? Because this government is not transparent. This government is a failing government, they have things to hide, and they are hiding them. They are hiding things from every Victorian and they are hiding them from the opposition because they do not want to be accountable for them. Meanwhile we have many Victorians in the south-east who are having to deal with mental health issues in their family, in their friends and in their community.

I just want to give you another stat here. In 2022–23, in the South Eastern Melbourne Primary Health Network, nearly 6000 referrals – 5906 – were made just in that one year. But guess what, they only worked with 3929 episodes, so that is 2000 people that were referred to this healthcare place where they did not receive episodes of care. My question is: why? I want to know why, if everything is being well funded. I mean, there is only so much that a limited amount of staff can do, isn't there? I am sure Ms Crozier knows this because she has been a nurse, she has worked in this industry, so of course she has got friends and community leaders and people that she knows in this industry. This is her portfolio, but she has lived experience in this area. We know that we are in a situation where we have lots of people that are experiencing difficulty in the mental health wards in the hospitals alone, that they are overcrowded, that they have got drug addicts in them taking up beds where mental health patients are supposed to be. What is happening to all these mental health patients? I will tell you. They get let back out into the community and back into their homes, and that is a fact. This is not rhetoric, this is not spin.

This is an issue that is very real in the south-east and it is very real in the schools. You do not have to go far to meet a teacher who will tell you the sort of stuff they are dealing with, with students pacing up and down in rooms. The sort of stuff that you should be seeing in a hospital, they are dealing with in the classroom. Meanwhile this government is receiving all this money, over \$1 billion in levies in just one year, and where has it gone? Has it gone into the mental health space? We do not know where it is, and that is why we have put this motion up. I commend Ms Crozier for doing the hard work of looking at the details that we need to have exposed so that we can see. If this government has got nothing to hide, then it should provide the documentation. If it has got nothing to hide in how it is spending its money, we want to see it. That is all this motion is really about. It is saying we need the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission to look at the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System outcomes. That is what this is asking for. The motion details some of the things that we need to be able to see, because we are significantly worried.

I can tell you that in some cases crime that is taking place in the south-east, in my region, is a result of mental health. I do not know what caused the terrible situation of the vandalism of all the wreaths that were placed on Remembrance Day in Dandenong. I was there and placed a wreath, and I do not know. I was absolutely gutted and devastated to see the decimation that took place. Was that someone who had something against Remembrance Day or was that mental health? In the situation we are in in Dandenong we would not know, because there are that many homeless people out there and many of them are suffering from mental health issues. This is a real issue. It is a real issue for people in the south-east. Mental health is out the front of my office all the time – people that have been left that are homeless, that are begging, that are in situations that you would not expect to see in the state of Victoria. It is – *(Time expired)*

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (15:10): It has been three years since the final report of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. The Victorian Labor government committed to implementing all 65 recommendations in full. The government is to be commended for undertaking the royal commission and for its early leadership in committing to reform. There was a brief but very significant funding boost and some welcome investment in workforce and infrastructure, and the government should also be recognised and congratulated for that. But we must remember what the royal commission uncovered – that the mental health sector has been chronically deprived of investment and attention. That initial funding boost was only enough to start to make up for the huge deficit that exists in the mental health sector. In order to undertake the scale of reform required, it requires significantly increased funding that is sustained over time.

Unfortunately, the momentum that was building around mental health reform was interrupted by COVID-19, as the minister has described. The pandemic response derailed so many things, including progress on implementing the findings of the royal commission. Sector stakeholders and people who use mental health services are now worried. Foremost, there is little transparency on the progress of the 65 recommendations, and that is the crux of what this motion seeks to address. Key recommendations have yet to be funded in state budgets, with no indication of when they might be implemented, and the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, which was set up with a broad remit to implement and oversee the system, has had over 16,000 complaints made to it without issuing a single compliance order.

We have spoken to sector stakeholders who want improvements and more transparency on the implementation of these recommendations, and in their submission to the upcoming 2025–26 budget, peak body Mental Health Victoria have called on the government to provide clarity and justification about the next steps and progress on the reform implementation, as well as to be transparent in budget papers about where the mental health and wellbeing levy funding is going. Sector stakeholders are left to wonder when key reforms will be implemented, if ever. Then last month, in response to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee report on the 2021–22 and 2022–23 financial and performance outcomes, the government rejected the committee's recommendation to report on the specific departments, outputs and mental health services or initiatives funded by the mental health and wellbeing levy in future annual reports. This disappointing decision leaves stakeholders and consumers in the dark.

Two years ago the Greens supported the Mental Health and Wellbeing Bill 2022, despite our misgivings about the fact that the bill was amended to remove the legislation of royal commission recommendation 10, to replace police with paramedics as first responders in mental health crises. At the time we met the department and were assured that recommendation 10 had not been forgotten or abandoned but that paramedics were stretched too thin in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic to be able to add this responsibility to their workload. This was fair enough, so we passed the bill in good faith, but two years later it is not clear that any progress has been made, and every time we ask the government exactly what they are doing to properly resource and support our paramedics to take on this important work we are left none the wiser.

It is not only recommendation 10 that has not been implemented. Recommendation 29, to establish a lived-experience agency to inform and deliver mental health services, has had no progress that we are aware of. It remains unclear whether recommendation 25, to guarantee supported housing for adults and young people living with mental illness, has been implemented. The rollout of recommendation 3, the establishment of mental health and wellbeing locals, has been delayed. Recommendation 4, to establish eight regional bodies to advise on mental health and wellbeing, has been shelved, something I am especially concerned about as a representative of regional areas in Western Victoria. And a number of recommendations related to attracting and maintaining a strong and well-supported workforce have also failed to be implemented.

Unions report that the government recently walked back on their promise to deliver an additional 800 mental health worker positions across all areas of mental health services. They are also concerned that the government may not support the inclusion of staffing profiles in their new enterprise bargaining agreement, which would outline the type of staff to be employed at each mental health care facility. The failure to adequately resource and support the mental health workforce means workers are unsafe and burnt out and makes it harder for care workers to reduce the use of seclusion and restraint practices while also keeping themselves and other patients safe.

I could go on about the many royal commission recommendations that have been delayed, possibly for good, but you get the picture. There may well be many very good reasons for the delays. Mental health reform, we understand, is difficult and expensive. Expanding the workforce, building new facilities and rewriting the intersections between different sectors and the complexities of the law when it comes to mental health do not happen overnight. Stakeholders who are invested in mental health reform I think would be understanding if there were reasonable explanations, but because they have not been getting them, it is no wonder that there is suspicion about the government's commitment to continuing its initial excellent work on mental health reform.

We understand that one of the key roles of the commission is to monitor the implementation of the royal commission recommendations, and this function is supported by legislation. This inquiry would provide direction in terms of that work, and it can be seen as consistent with their remit rather than contrary to it. The inquiry would simply provide a way to check in on these important reforms, the timeline for implementing the remaining recommendations and the outcomes of the changes that have been brought in so far, including the Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022. It would allow us to look closely at staffing numbers, staff wellbeing and what would be needed to ensure the future recruitment and retention of high-quality mental healthcare staff, as well as the broader capacity of the system to meet growing demand for mental health services. It will also be important to look at how Victoria can best respond to past harms inflicted by the mental health system. It would do all of this publicly.

The Greens will be supporting this inquiry referral. I have to say that some of the comments that were made by others in this chamber, particularly some of the comments from the opposition, are ones that we do not support – the last contribution was one in which there was very little I would agree with – but the substance of the motion is something that we can support. I think a lot of the additional commentary was not relevant to what is in the motion, and on that basis we will be supporting it. The mental health sector needs certainty that the state government remains committed to implementing all of the reforms coming out of the royal commission, and this is one way that that can be demonstrated.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): I acknowledge a former member in the chamber, Clifford Hayes.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:17): I rise to make a contribution on this motion in regard to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission. I have had the benefit of listening to some of the contributions here in the chamber today, but effectively what the motion is calling for is for the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission to inquire into the status and outcomes of the implementations and recommendations from the royal commission. I am proud to be part of the Allan Labor government, which has taken strong action and made really historic investments into the mental

health system, because we recognise that the mental health system is a critical part of our overall health system. It was a Labor government that established the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

Since that time the government has made huge inroads into that landmark reform, and I might just comment on some of the investments. For example, for the 2024–25 budget year the government has invested \$1.2 billion, and this has been outlined in the budget papers. It might actually benefit those opposite to understand how to read the budget papers, because it might be useful for them to understand that level of investment. \$1.2 billion per year – we have literally doubled our investment compared to the investment prior to the royal commission. If I recall correctly, it was those opposite who voted against the mental health levy, so I find it quite curious that we are actually here today debating a motion calling on –

Members interjecting.

Sonja TERPSTRA: I will get to the reason why. It is interesting – looking at this motion on the surface you would think that the motion is coming from a level of care and concern, but in fact if you look at the end of the motion it tells you all you need to know about what is really at the bottom of all of this, because what is being requested is that the commission complete its report into these matters by March 2026. That is an election year. It is no wonder those opposite want to run with something in an election year, because they are absolutely transparent when it comes to using mental health as a weapon. They want to weaponise this when what they need to actually acknowledge is that they are failures. They have never invested in anything. I will say it again: those opposite voted against the mental health levy. And I will say it again: \$1.2 billion per year in the 2024–25 budget. We have doubled our investment compared to prior to the royal commission, and that is in total, so far, a \$3 billion investment.

It should come as no surprise that these things take time. The commission is doing its work. The commission has been set up independently of government, and the commission is already undertaking its work to evaluate whether the government is on track in implementing the recommendations of the royal commission. Again you find it is in a similar kind of style to all of these referrals in the past to the integrity bodies to make sure we inquire into and report on things that the government may or may not have done, and what it does is actually ties up the finite resources of those bodies. This is unnecessary because the commission has been set up to do its own work. It is independent of government. They are already analysing and looking at how the performance of this government is tracking in terms of implementing the recommendations. This would be asking the commission to do something that it is already doing, and it would just tie up the commission again by wasting finite resources. This is critically important, because we know Victorians need a mental health system that they can rely on.

I will just talk about some of the things that have in fact happened. Of course we heard those opposite bring out all of the latest and greatest boring hits that we hear from them: everything is the government's fault, COVID was the government's fault as well and we created COVID just to inflict pain and suffering on the Victorian people. That is the kind of garbage that we have got from those opposite today. They just bring out the same latest and greatest hits, rather than talking about –

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, Acting President, I just cannot let Ms Terpstra get away with what she is saying, which is completely false. In fact she is lying to the chamber, and I would ask her to withdraw those ridiculous statements she has just made, because –

Sonja TERPSTRA: A bit tetchy, are we?

Georgie Crozier: No. It is just not true. It is not true what you have just mentioned, so withdraw your comments and get back to the motion.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): Sorry, Ms Crozier and Ms Terpstra. There is no point of order. Continue and keep to the bill.

Sonja TERPSTRA: I will keep to the motion, because the comments that were made by Mrs Hermans went exactly to this motion. She made the contribution, and I am entitled to respond to it, and it is relating to the motion. So you can sit there –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: On a point of order, Acting President, Ms Crozier should either direct her comments through the Chair or stop interjecting. I do not need her assistance.

Georgie Crozier: Through the Chair: don't lie.

Sonja TERPSTRA: You do not have the call either. That is not a point of order.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): Thank you, Ms Crozier. I think maybe you can desist, and Ms Terpstra, you can stick to the motion at hand, and we will proceed without interjection.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Thank you, Acting President – a very wise ruling. I commend you for it. As I was saying – and I will keep reiterating the point – we have had the most ridiculous contributions on all the misery that this government has inflicted upon the Victorian people. But I will tell you in fact what we are doing, and as I said, I will keep repeating it, because it is worthy of repeating.

With the \$1.2 billion per year investment that is coming from the mental health levy, which those opposite voted against, we have doubled our investment compared to prior to the royal commission, with a total of \$3 billion investment. And let us have a look at the workforce that we have invested in and more than \$600 million in workforce reforms, creating over 2500 new early-career mental health roles, more than 1200 scholarships, more than a hundred lived experience roles, more than 90 psychiatry registrar roles, more than 300 psychology registrar roles, more than 1200 roles for mental health nurse graduates or those transitioning from general to mental health nursing, over 900 roles for allied health graduates or general to mental health transition and a 17 per cent growth in funded FTE in public mental health and wellbeing services. That was not there before. None of that was there before, and the mental health levy that those opposite voted against is what is funding these critically important roles.

I return to the point that I was making before, because, again, those opposite do not care about the mental health and wellbeing of Victorians. All they care about is trying to get a motion through this house which would make the commission do what it is already doing and waste its finite and precious resources, which are directed to helping Victorians get the mental health supports that they need, and have it report back in an election year. They are transparent about what they are seeking to do. They are not about helping Victorians access the mental health care and supports that they need. We know that because they voted against the mental health levy. We know that because again they come in here with these spurious motions saying they actually care about things when they do not. The commission was set up to inquire into exactly these sorts of things. They are already looking at this government's performance in terms of whether we are implementing the recommendations of the royal commission.

Nick McGowan interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: I will take up the interjection of Mr McGowan on the opposition benches, who seems to like to bring a toilet to festivals for people to sign, which is quite bizarre. In any event what we know is that these people who are seeking mental health services need workers –

Nick McGowan interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: On a point of order, Acting President –

Nick McGowan interjected.

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Sonja TERPSTRA: Shut up.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): Order! Thank you, Mr McGowan.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Sorry, Acting President, I cannot hear myself speak because of the constant interjections from Mr McGowan opposite, and I do not need his assistance.

Nick McGowan: On a point of order, Acting President, I understand or believe, unless my ears deceive me, that Ms Terpstra just told me to shut up. That is highly unparliamentary, and I ask her to withdraw that.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): Perhaps you could all refrain from interjecting and keep it calm and just press on, Ms Terpstra. You have got 11 seconds left.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Another very wise ruling – thank you, Acting President.

Nick McGowan: On the point of order, Acting President, I have made a point of order, and I would like a ruling on that point of order. The conduct by the member is unparliamentary, and I have asked her to withdraw.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): Ms Terpstra, could you withdraw?

Sonja TERPSTRA: I will not withdraw.

Georgie Crozier: You won't withdraw?

Sonja TERPSTRA: No, I will not.

Nick McGowan: On a point of order, Acting President, there is a clear precedent in this chamber on that point: the member should leave the chamber.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): I will have to seek further advice on this.

Lee Tarlamis: Further on the point of order, Acting President, Ms Terpstra actually rose to raise a point of order, and while she was trying to make that point of order Mr McGowan was interjecting and she could not articulate that point of order, so her point of order should take precedence anyway.

Georgie Crozier: On the point of order, Acting President, the commentary was very unparliamentary, and that was what Mr McGowan was asking Ms Terpstra to withdraw. She refuses to, and I think that is –

Sonja TERPSTRA: My point of order needs to be ruled on.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): Excuse me, Ms Terpstra. Ms Crozier has the call.

Georgie Crozier: Acting President, I think if Ms Terpstra gets away with this, then what else is she going to get away with?

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): We will pause for a moment, and we will get the President to come in and rule on your language, considered unparliamentary by Mr McGowan, and we will get an outcome.

The PRESIDENT: My understanding is that Mr McGowan took offence to Ms Terpstra telling him to shut up. Is that pretty much the crux of it? Ms Terpstra, my advice is that someone can take offence to being told to shut up. My advice would be, Ms Terpstra, that you withdraw, and then we all have a think about what we should determine as offensive or not, because we have had occasions this year where I think people withdrew when they probably did not have to and some people did not withdraw when they probably should have. Maybe we should take it to the Procedure Committee and consider that. I will ask you to withdraw.

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Sonja TERPSTRA: Just before I make any further comment, the context was that there was continued interjection from Mr McGowan. Mr Tarlamis made a further point of order about that point, so there is context around what transpired. I had made the point that I had raised it –

The PRESIDENT: I will take this as a point of order, and I will address that.

Sonja TERPSTRA: I had raised the point of order that I should be allowed to continue without constant interjection.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, I will take that point of order. If you withdraw, then I will take that as a point of order.

Sonja TERPSTRA: I will not withdraw.

The PRESIDENT: Unfortunately, you are going to have to leave the chamber for half an hour.

Sonja Terpstra interjected.

The PRESIDENT: I will address that.

Sonja Terpstra withdrew from chamber.

Nick McGowan: On a point of order, President, not only was the member not in their place but for them to throw that word out – and I am not even going to give her the dignity of repeating it; there is no basis for that – it is a disgusting, despicable word for her to have used in front of everyone in this place, in this chamber. I do not know what sanctions are available, but I would only encourage the Chair to apply them, because I have absolutely no harbour for that sort of behaviour in a civilised chamber.

The PRESIDENT: I have committed that we should review what people find offensive, and I will do that. I just want to say too that there is a really good ruling – and I will find it – from a previous president. I have not got my rulings book, so I will not find it. But in saying that, it is a great ruling because what the president says – it is a president I think from the 1980s, so it is quite a while ago – is the main thing in this chamber that all members should respect is freedom of speech. If someone has a barrage of interjections to the point that they cannot even deliver – I am saying either side of the chamber; it is not for me to come and judge. I think sometimes people enjoy the interaction if it is not too personal and there is colour. There are people in here that like that sort of thing, and it is what makes them tick. But I think that there are some points where maybe I need to do a better job in making sure that a barrage of interjections does not impinge on what is a really important right in here, for people to have freedom of speech and to be able to deliver what they want to say even if other people strongly disagree. I think we will just do our best and go from there.

Gaëlle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (15:35): I will endeavour to bring the chamber back to the focus that we have here this afternoon, which is talking about this motion put forward by Georgie Crozier – and I thank her for her work on this – to ask the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission to report on the status and outcomes of the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. It is important to note that the longer we wait for Labor to act on the royal commission's 2019 recommendations around workforce development, the longer the waiting lists will grow, the deeper the mental harms will become and the more pressure our existing mental health workforce will face. Currently, three out of seven recommendations from the interim report that was produced back in 2019 are yet to be completed.

There are significant challenges that we face in Victoria now, and I have no doubt that COVID has played a part in that. Victoria was the most locked down state in the world at one point. We know the impact that the closures had on businesses, on students, on schools. I note too there was a petition

started just recently, in October, that has already got nearly 11,000 signatures. It was written by a mum, who said:

I lost my 16 year old son to suicide in April 2020, during the first of Dan Andrew's record six lockdowns.

She went on to say:

How can a divisive ex-premier in Andrews, who has wreaked havoc on Victoria, presided over the longest lockdowns in the world with the highest suicide rates, be appointed to chair 'Orygen', a prominent and respected youth mental health body.

It is interesting to note news reports into that that say the former Premier will receive up to \$225,000 for his appointment over the three years, and that is on top of a pension of already up to \$300,000 from being a premier, according to news reports.

Labor said that they would implement all the recommendations of the royal commission, but we have seen them slowly pull away from a number of those. We have seen the impact that that has had. I have spoken just recently about two people in Bendigo that have raised concerns about a new service being brought in at Bendigo Community Health Service. Funding was cut to a program, and I understand that about 150 people were to go across to the adult local but only eight of them have been transferred. There are serious concerns about these changes, when a program was working effectively on the ground and now, with the changes that they are continuing to introduce, they seem to be mucking up a perfectly good program. This motion also talks about the need to highlight – or uncover, I should say – where the funding, the billion dollars raised every year from the mental health levy, is going. That is something that we see very little of: transparency in government.

When the Victorian government accepted all 65 recommendations, a key spokesperson at the time said:

There is one inescapable truth: we are failing. And it is costing lives.

I really encourage members of this chamber to support this motion to ensure that we assess the quality of Victoria's mental health system.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

I rise to speak on this motion to require the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission (MHWC) to inquire into, consider and report on the status and outcomes of the implementation of the Royal Commission into the Victorian Mental Health System recommendations.

It was compassion that the Royal Commission put at the centre of reforms to our mental health and wellbeing system.

Compassion for those with lived experiences with mental health struggles, compassion for their families, and compassion for all those who support them. Because it is compassion that makes such a difference.

I appreciate that this motion in part likely comes from a place of compassion. It is compassion I share – our mental health workforce is understaffed and overworked. Access to mental health care in our state also undoubtedly has a long way to go.

The Royal Commission envisaged 'a reimagined system that will support the mental health and wellbeing of Victorians for generations to come'.

This kind of systemic change is something that takes time and will inevitably encounter hurdles.

While we agree that a part of this journey is keeping government accountable to their commitments, we are satisfied that as it stands, existing systems, including the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission undertake sufficient review and reporting practices.

Our focus must be on looking forward, and working to implement the recommendations, rather than taking resources away. These reforms are still in their infancy – it is important to keep in mind that the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission was only set up last year.

We are also concerned about the reference to auditing expenditure of the mental health levy in this motion.

We hate to be cynical about the intention of this motion but given how often we hear the Opposition talk about their running count of taxes in Victoria, we have reason to suspect they would love to see this levy scrapped.

This would destroy essential funds for rebuilding Victoria's mental health system.

For these reasons, we will not be supporting this motion today, but we will continue to closely monitor the implementation of these reforms and hold the government to account.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:39): I do want to sum up, because I want to respond to some points that have been raised by government members.

In relation to the commission and the work they are doing in implementing the recommendations and tracking what is going on, they actually wrote to the government and expressed in May this year:

... we wrote to the Department of Health and the Victorian Government requesting a briefing to explain the rationale underpinning the delay in implementing key recommendations of the Royal Commission.

We are keen to understand how decisions were made, which stakeholders were consulted, see a timeline for the delivery of recommendations and understand how people with a lived experience will play a key role in reform.

They also said:

... we've been listening to consumers, carers, peak bodies, lived experience experts, advocacy agencies and other stakeholders. We've heard stakeholders express disappointment and confusion about the future of mental health reform in Victoria, and we recognise that this may be a distressing and uncertain time for many.

That is the commission writing to the government about the government's own implementation of the recommendations. That is exactly what this motion is about. The minister herself talked about the investment, the \$1.1 billion levy from business, and claimed it is in the budget. The budget papers do not provide a breakdown of where that money is spent, and that is why the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee actually asked for transparent reporting of the levy.

A former commissioner Professor Allan Fels, somebody who is so highly regarded in this area and who was the key architect of the levy, has called for a detailed breakdown of where exactly taxpayer money from the mental health levy is being spent, with a lack of transparency fuelling concerns it is not being used as promised. That is from Professor Allan Fels, who was on the royal commission and an architect of the levy. That is what he said just a few days ago, on 2 November 2024.

Just going back to the levy, the minister says this is all a stunt – this motion is a stunt – and I say that is insulting to those stakeholders and to people like Professor Fels, who understand this issue and want to get it right. It is not a stunt; it is a serious motion that is going to the heart of failures and why we need the commission to investigate. Money from the mental health levy, can you believe it, has been reported as income by Cladding Safety Victoria. That is not exactly a well-known mental health service provider. They are the authority that are responsible for the assessment and removal of flammable cladding. That is what this government has done, playing all sorts of accounting tricks with money in the budget, and that is where the mental health levy money was moved around to, and it is reported as being in the flammable cladding safety authority in Victoria. If ever there were a reason to understand where this mental health levy money has gone, the \$1.1 billion, that would be it. That is why the government does not want this motion to pass. That is why they do not want the commission to look into what exactly the motion talks about, the detailed analysis of the impact of the delays and why the implementation of the recommendations has been stalled. They wrote to the government asking for that themselves.

This is a really important motion that goes to the heart of trying to get the mental health system right to provide support to those people that require that support and care. We do not want this to be failing; we want to get it right. But I think taxpayers, who are paying \$1.1 billion, also deserve to understand where that money has gone to, as Professor Fels has said. That \$1 billion, which comes in every single year, needs to be accounted for. Currently we have no transparency and no understanding, and assertions by the minister and members of the government diminishing the importance of what we are

arguing and debating here in the chamber say more about them than they do about those stakeholders that are concerned, including people like Professor Allan Fels. I have to say I want to put on record the work of the shadow minister Emma Kealy, who has spoken to the stakeholders and who understands the issues. I am urging all members to support this very important motion.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (16): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Richard Welch

Noes (19): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (15:51): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Deer hunting

Jeff Bourman (Eastern Victoria) (15:51): I move:

That this house notes that:

- (1) deer hunting is the premier hunting activity in Victoria, with over 48,000 game licences held for the express purpose of hunting deer, both by stalking and hound hunting;
- (2) recreational deer hunting contributes over \$200 million a year to the Victorian economy and provides around 2000 jobs, with 69 per cent of hunter expenditure coming from regional Victoria;
- (3) recreational deer hunting is the dominant below-snowline use of the Alpine National Park and the revenue from hunting tourism is vital to several regional communities;
- (4) Victoria's recreational hunters kill around 140,000 deer annually, most of them female and most of them on public land;
- (5) the recreational deer harvest in Victoria dwarfs that of government-sponsored control programs, all whilst providing triple bottom line benefits to the state;
- (6) there are large tracts of public land that are national parks that are not open to seasonal hunting by licensed deer hunters, with no sound rationale for their exclusion;

and calls on the government to open appropriate tracts of applicable national parks at suitable times to recreational hunters to increase opportunities for Victoria's burgeoning recreational deer-hunting community to engage in their chosen outdoor recreation.

I will just quickly run through it. Deer hunting is a premier activity in Victoria, with 48,000 licences for stalking and hound hunting, and there are about 220,000 people with a shooters licence in Victoria, so whilst deer hunters are a growing cohort, there are a lot of people that do enjoy shooting as well as hunting. The Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party are always advocating for public land being for the public and for expanding use as long as it is appropriate, so we do not, obviously, support any new national parks, though I will note the ones that we are going to fight were promised some time ago, but it has been such a long time I do not see why we are at it at the moment.

There has been a lot of conjecture about how much shooting and hunting do or do not inject into the economy, but in the last study it was over \$200 million into the economy. That is not chump change; that is a fair whack, basically, of expenditure that is completely by choice. About 69 per cent of that \$200 million – roughly \$140 million, bearing in mind I am a politician, not a mathematician – goes to quite a struggling part of this state, and that is the rural and regional economy. \$140 million might not seem a lot to a chamber where we talk in tens or hundreds of millions or billions, but 140 million bucks to, say, the servo up at Kerang or 140 million bucks for a motel out in the north of the state or the east of the state – not that there are any ducks in Gippsland, of course –

Enver Erdogan interjected.

Jeff BOURMAN: It is an ongoing joke, Mr Erdogan. But that sort of money means a lot to a lot of people. Discretionary income is the key to this. It is not a job; it is something people do. They spend this money by choice; they spend this money on upgrading their stuff by choice. Hunting of course has been in the human DNA since the day we were either created or crawled out of the primordial ooze, depending on your view on life, but we have been doing it. Some people hunt in supermarkets; I suggest more people should hunt on public land, where it is appropriate.

Getting down to how many deer are removed from the environment, this is where the opposition to these sorts of things gets kind of weird. Hunters remove about 140,000 deer from the Victorian environment. This is not shooting things as a cull and this is not being paid by someone to do it; this is people who spend their own money to willingly go out and remove the deer from the environment and generally eat as much as they can carry out. Obviously, some people will go deep into the wilds and carry out as much as they can – say, a full-sized sambar stag. You can get up to 80 kilos or thereabouts of usable meat from them, and that is a lot to be trying to carry 10 kilometres over mountainous territory, but generally people will take what they can. If you are lucky enough to shoot one that is near a car, generally a whole lot more gets used.

Culling programs cannot compete. Helicopter gunships fly around at hideous expense and generally use semiautomatic rifles, which we are not allowed to have as recreational hunters, and they shoot the deer. But they shoot them to stop them. At a recent inquiry in New South Wales one of my colleagues, Robert Borsak, was asking questions of the bureaucrats up there, and it can take up to 15 shots to shoot a deer or a horse-sized object from a helicopter. That ain't humane in anyone's book. Most on-the-ground hunters go for one shot, one kill. I have seen plenty of instances where that is the case. Occasionally wounding is an issue, and I always suggest people practise more. Going to a range is not just a thing to do on a spare day. If you are a hunter, you should at least up your proficiency – there is no such thing as being too good a shot. But most hunters pride themselves on getting the kill done as humanely as possible. After all, hunting is not necessarily about just killing the animal. It is walking out there, it is being in nature, it is camping, it is spending time with friends and family and it is using public land in the way it was intended to be used.

There are still large tracts of some existing national parks that could be used by recreational hunters. Currently, the deer are just culled, so it is not like they are not being shot. But there are also some, such as Wilsons Prom, where an organised cull is the only way to do it. Some time ago I did not watch actual shooting, but I did watch the behind the scenes of the culling. To keep people safe – because it is a tourist attraction – they shut off every possible avenue they could find, yet people still made it through. They had Parks Victoria people supervising hunters that had proven their abilities. I saw that there were avenues where you could shoot and could not shoot, and in the end it diminishes the take, but it makes it safer given the small area and where it is.

We look at what we have got going around now, and there are opportunities. Opportunity knocks every once in a while, and I believe that whilst public land is a conversation we are having, we should look and think about this practically. The practicality is that we are removing deer from the environment. National parks as they stand, even where you can hunt deer, present quite some problems. If you are out hunting a deer and you see a feral cat go past or a feral dog – not a dingo, but

a feral dog – or any other thing that has been declared a pest, you cannot shoot it. If you shoot the pest animal while you are in a national park and get caught, you will lose your licence and be charged even though you can hunt a deer, which also torpedoed the idea of making deer a pest unless you want to shoot less of them.

It does make me wonder why the Invasive Species Council and the Victorian National Parks Association and all their co-tenants at 60L spend so much time trying to have deer declared a pest, when it will actually mean less will be hunted, less will be shot and less will be removed from the environment. If they were true to their names, they would be more about getting as many removed as they could – not just, ‘I don’t like people hunting them because, God forbid, they might enjoy it.’ If you do it as a job, it is okay, but if you enjoy it, it is not good, so I do not know what happens if you enjoy your job.

But it gets down to the problem then of ideology. Ideology is one of the biggest hurdles to good public policy, when you just have a mindset and you will not think outside that mindset. We all have it to a degree. I have my ideology. Everyone here has their ideology. But we should always, always think outside the square. I will give the Animal Justice Party one thing: at least they are always consistent. They do not want anything hunted, they do not want anything shot, they do not like culls and they do not like recreational hunting or for anything that was moving to be eaten.

Some people want deer to be declared pests. In fact the amount of times over the last 10 years – and it has been 10 years I have been in here – I have had to explain to people from all over the political spectrum why making deer a pest would be bad surprises me. If deer are declared a pest, then the landowner is required to control them at the landowner’s cost. Game animals are managed by the government, and therefore in this case we pay to hunt game animals. What you can do on a farm, on private land – obviously, subject to animal welfare concerns – is shoot them any time of the day or night, as long as you abide by safety rules and calibre rules and such. So to declare them a pest would do nothing except make farmers have to pay for it, whereas now it is the government’s problem. Right now, as it stands, a farmer can spotlight a deer, whereas you cannot on public land – and nor should you; even if it is other hunters out there, you do not want people spotlighting at night where they cannot see beyond the spotlight. So why does everyone – the royal ‘everyone’ – want them declared a pest? Ideology.

Deer hunting brings income into the regions and urban areas. There are gun stores, there are camping stores and there is, obviously, petrol. Site transporters are still somewhat on the horizon; we cannot just transport ourselves wherever we want. It delivers protein to the hunter and their family. They know where it has been from paddock to plate. They have actually done it, something we cannot say for supermarket meat. The part I enjoy the most is just getting the hell out of town. You can get out there. You spend a lot of time walking around. Maybe you get to actually shoot at an animal and complete the hunt, but a lot of the time it is just being there. It is being out; it is being miles from anywhere and, if you are lucky, out of phone coverage. You wonder why this would not be supported by everyone, except as I said Animal Justice. They have always got a thing. I do not like being nice to Animal Justice, but in fairness at least they are consistent.

I think we should investigate whether we can get recreational hunters into more appropriate existing national parks at appropriate times to reduce the number of deer. It increases the fiscal input into the regions, gets more people away from devices and gets more people out into nature, not just watching it on TV like others.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (16:03): I thank Mr Bourman for bringing this motion today, but the Greens will not be supporting it. This is just a blatant ploy to get access to more and more public land for the benefit of a very small group of Victorians who like to shoot and kill animals. Not content with locking people out of Victoria’s wetlands for months of the year to shoot ducks, now the shooting lobby wants to lock us out of more of our national parks. If families wanted to go for a bushwalk in a national park, would the onus be on them to work out which part of the

national park was off limits for that day or month because of the risk of bullets flying around? Maybe they would be required to wear a hi-vis vest in order to not be shot while trying to enjoy the peaceful connection with nature that our national parks provide. Hundreds of thousands of Victorians use our national parks daily, weekly and monthly. One of the joys is that people know that these parks are protected. They can simply arrive and choose their pastime of pleasure – walking, orienteering, birdwatching, camping, swimming or picnicking.

Rather than giving open slather to hunters in more of our national parks, the government should be urgently removing deer from the Wildlife Act 1975 to reflect their true status as an invasive pest species. It is ridiculous that deer are protected under the Wildlife Act. The reason that this act now protects invasive feral deer as game animals is pressure from the shooting lobby. Last year Labor had the perfect opportunity to address this issue in the *Victorian Deer Control Strategy*, and instead once again they caved in to pressure from the shooting lobby, which has a vested interest in continuing populations of deer at high levels so that they can shoot at them.

And before we hear pathetic excuses from the shooting lobby that they are part of the solution to the deer problem, it is abundantly clear that amateur hunters are completely not up to the task of getting rid of this major feral animal problem that they through their lobbying have in fact assisted in creating. Amateur hunters have done little to manage populations across areas in which they are already allowed to shoot – demonstrable when we see how much the deer populations are increasing.

Deer are an invasive species. They do cause damage to our environment and they do cost farmers, community and the state a fortune. They should be declared pests under the Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994. Now, the Minister for Environment recently provided an answer to a question on notice that half of these species of deer that are common – chital, rusa, wapiti and sika deer – are undergoing review of their classification to determine whether they should be classified as pest animals under the act. We will continue to ask questions about this and also about other species, such as hog, red, sambar and fallow, and whether their classifications are suitable for review. The solution to the deer problem is not locking Victorians out of their own national parks because there are bullets flying around. The Greens will not be supporting this motion today.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:06): I rise to contribute to Mr Bourman's motion, which relates to deer hunting across Victoria, and I want to say from the outset that the Allan Labor government supports this motion. On a personal level I am particularly pleased with this motion and its aims. In particular this motion moves that:

- (1) deer hunting is the premier hunting activity in Victoria, with over 48,000 game licences held for the express purpose of hunting deer, both by stalking and hound hunting;
- (2) recreational deer hunting contributes over \$200 million a year to the Victorian economy and provides around 2000 jobs, with 69 per cent of hunter expenditure coming from regional Victoria;
- (3) recreational deer hunting is the dominant below-snowline use of the Alpine National Park and the revenue from hunting tourism is vital to several regional communities;
- (4) Victoria's recreational hunters kill around 140,000 deer annually, most of them female and most of them on public land;
- (5) the recreational deer harvest in Victoria dwarfs that of government-sponsored control programs, all whilst providing triple bottom line benefits to the state;
- (6) there are large tracts of public land that are national parks that are not open to seasonal hunting by licensed deer hunters, with no sound rationale for their exclusion ...

And the motion calls on the government to open appropriate tracts of applicable national parks at suitable times to recreational hunters to increase opportunities for growing deer-hunting communities to engage in their outdoor recreation of choice.

Firstly, I want to begin by thanking my friend Mr Bourman for bringing this motion to the chamber, because I am excited about the opportunity it provides me to talk about many other outdoor recreational activities that Victorians take up on the weekend. As stated in the motion, around

140,000 deer are killed each year by recreational hunters from all corners of the state. These kills for the most part are happening on public land, and the majority of these kills are also female deer. Within the public land of course we are discussing national parks, many of which are not open to seasonal hunting by licensed recreational deer hunters.

Deer are hunted for a wide variety of reasons, but recreation appears to be the salient one among them. Over 48,000 game licences are held in the state specifically for deer hunting. Of that figure an overwhelmingly large majority are for deer specifically, at 29,000. An overwhelming majority of game licence holders in Victoria are men between the ages of 28 and 57, who make up just over 33,000 of the game licence holders. The number of hunters is in fact growing each year. From 2023 to 2024 the number of game licence holders specifically for deer rose by about 1140. Right now that number is just under 47,500. A decade ago it was just over 28,000.

A large majority of deer hunters also live in the east of Victoria, out in Gippsland. If you go out to Bairnsdale, statistically you are two to three times more likely to find a hunter than if you were going to go to Portland or Warrnambool, and even then it is much higher than what you would find in Southern Metropolitan Region. That of course is not surprising, given the high concentration of deer out around Traralgon and Bairnsdale compared to outer Melbourne or the west of Victoria.

Just under 70 per cent of hunter expenditure in this state comes from those regional areas, and in fact deer hunting may well be one of the most common recreational activities in regional Victoria. According to Mr Bourman's motion, there can be around \$200 million attributed to deer hunting activities in Victoria. In fact the estimated contribution to our economy in 2019 was \$201 million to be sure. That is over 50 per cent of the total recreational hunting contribution. The vast majority of the boost, and the 3000 jobs it creates in Victoria's regions, includes \$12 million in Mansfield, \$11 million in Gippsland and \$9 million in the Latrobe, and it is a growing sport. This can be attributed in part to the large number of deer in the state. We have nearly 1 million deer in Victoria spread across around 40 per cent the state.

But this boom has its downsides, and that can be causing grief to local communities and wildlife. That is why the Allan Labor government has continued with the state's deer control program to bring the deer population boom under control at a manageable rate. The Allan Labor government announced a long-term strategy for deer population control in 2020 and allocated \$22 million to deliver it. We are working in close cooperation with our federal government partners and understand that deer population issues transcend state borders. In fact the recent 2024–25 Victorian budget provided \$11.6 million over three years to support safe, sustainable and responsible hunting. This investment helps support the work we are doing in this space to ensure best practices and to enable the important compliance and enforcement work of the Game Management Authority.

With the exception of hog deer, which is the smallest deer species in Australia – they have a yellow and reddish-brown coat and weigh around 40 kilos – there is no bag limit for recreational deer hunting. Sambar deer, for instance, can weigh up to 220 kilos, doubling the height of a hog deer, yet there are important and reasonable limitations. For a mixture of pragmatic and safety reasons, recreational hunting is not permitted at night – defined as half an hour after sunset until an hour before sunrise – on public land. On top of that, we recently adopted a commonsense approach to tamp down on the illegal spotlighting of deer.

Nevertheless, as Mr Bourman has alluded to in his motion, there is a difference in what the government and the private sector are doing, and this is reflected in the rules. Here the hunting of deer at night for control purposes, like protecting your land or family, is permitted on private land by the landowner or with the permission of the landowner to a third party. This plan understands the changing needs of Victoria and the ability to control the population in different parts of the state.

Our efforts to control deer as part of the broader interstate plan is working, and it is not just keeping our roads safe but protecting our environment. It is helping to keep the ecological balance. The

government and peak hunting bodies recognise deer can have a negative impact on biodiversity, safety and agriculture and cultural values. Deer hunting does help keep the population under control somewhat, with hunters going out and about.

I have spoken in the past in this chamber about venison, again on the point from Mr Bourman, who is an expert on this topic, and I have spoken about the excess of wild venison that is being developed for commercial and charitable purposes in the United States, something debated in this chamber. Clearly there is a lot of work to be done in this space, and there is great potential for harnessing this. This is why I am pleased the government has recently done a lot of work in this space, including the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2024, which did not include any additional restrictions on the recreational hunting of deer. However, I think we can all agree it is quite reasonable to require hunters to deal with wounded deer. On top of that it modernises the system, allowing for the use of handheld thermal imaging devices to hunt deer. This will be particularly useful during the day.

To wrap up today, we will continue to work with our partners across Victoria and the country to deliver great outcomes for the community in this space. That includes the Australian Deer Association, or ADA, the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia, or the SSAA, and we will work with government and non-government organisations, private landholders and government agencies to undertake deer control across the vast and beautiful countryside of Victoria. In fact just in September this year the Allan Labor government announced support for our hardworking farmers to protect their livestock, including an investment of more than \$2 million to undertake dingo monitoring and support for the north-west farmers to adopt management strategies. As part of this package of announcements the wild dog management program was expanded to include extra support to farmers to meet targeted controls of a wider range of animals, including deer. This expansion has led to the program being renamed as the vertebrate management program.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:14): I am really pleased to rise today to speak on behalf of the Nationals and the Liberals as lead speaker in relation to Mr Bourman's notice of motion 600 and state that whilst this is a bit of a snapshot of what is happening in the world of deer hunting and game hunting in Victoria it is also a fairly soft approach, calling on the government to continue to open up tracts of land in applicable national parks.

In Mr Bourman's contribution to the house he started off by saying he does not want to see any new national parks. I might like to just share with the house that as of today the petition that I have put forward in conjunction with Bush User Groups United, BUGU, has just shy of 23,000 signatures. So if anybody listening at home would like to actually go and jump online, have a look for 'No more new national parks'. It will come up, and you can sign it and be the 23,000th person to sign that. We would love your support. It sends a message to government that we do not need new national parks. What the government needs to do is to have a better approach to active land management of all of our public land estate, and I will get into that shortly.

Mr Bourman talked about national parks, and I will talk about that. He also spoke about ducks and duck hunting, and it is something that the Nationals and Liberals have passionately fought for, the continuation of duck hunting in this state.

Bev McArthur: What a wonderful thing.

Melina BATH: It is a wonderful thing. He also mentioned Wilsons Promontory down near my home area and the importance of management there – and that is particularly in relation to hog deer, which I have actually seen down at Wilsons Prom – public land in general, feral pests and weeds. Also, he spoke about how ideology is not good public policy, and that is actually something that is absolutely dear to my heart.

Deer hunting does come in a whole variety of shapes and sizes. It is game hunting, and people who speak to me and I communicate with are very active in their praise and support for deer continuing to be a game-hunting species. In speaking to some of my locals down in Gippsland, we have two

classifications of deer hunters: you can be a hound hunter or you can be those who stalk and, as they call it, glass – stalk and glass. It is certainly an art, and clearly in the past, if you were a successful hunter many, many centuries ago, then you got fed, because traditionally hunting was all around the pursuit of having a meal. Now people often use it as a way of communicating with each other and spending time with family and friends; different age groups all participate in this traditional activity.

We talk about the economic benefits, and I note that the RMCG 2020 report, which was unpacked very openly and well in the duck-hunting inquiry, goes to the very point that recreational hunting in general, of which deer hunting is part, is worth over \$356 million. That was some years ago now, so I am sure that has increased in value, and that is both spend by the hunters in general and the flow-on effect generated from their activity.

The key thing for everybody who is a regional MP is that 69 per cent of the hunting-related expenditure occurs outside of metropolitan Melbourne. It occurs in the regions and it occurs in our country towns and hamlets, and that is a good thing. It occurs at the Dargo pub, at the Licola General Store and at the Heyfield pub. You can stop in at Latrobe Valley, Sale, Straddie or Bairnsdale, and the Rosedale butcher does a mean piece of kabana on your way out into the bush to continue with your hunting fraternity. You can go into, as we have seen in the motion, the great Alpine National Park below the snowline, Wonnangatta, Tamboritha and the like, and also around Seaspray, where there are some hog deer, down in Gippsland.

You have got sambar, you have got red, and red I understand are often in those mountainous regions and in the Grampians, where apparently now this government has decided it is going to lock it up from people who have been doing another traditional pursuit, rock climbing, over many, many decades, which is having an impact on the community. Deer hunting provides specifically over \$100 million and over 3000 full-time equivalent jobs across the state, and as I said, many of those are in regional Victoria.

One of the things that Mr Bourman touched on was about public land, and he spoke about how ideology is not good public policy. If this government is not at sixes and sevens in relation to state forests, national parks and the like – over a period of time it has set up VEAC, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council. It has gone into the central west investigation in that space over there in the Wombat State Park and Lerderderg State Park and Mount Cole State Forest area, where there was timber harvesting in the past, now shut down by this government. It has now decided that it is going to lock up somewhere around 400,000 hectares of state forest into national parks.

What we are concerned about on this side of the house is very much how they are going to look after more national parks when this government are not looking after the national parks that they already have. You go into the Central Highlands – and we have got the eminent panel that has been around for a little while and then we also see the Great Outdoors Taskforce. If you go to their new, revised website, you see that they have actually carved out the scope of the Central Highlands, and so the statement on that Great Outdoors Taskforce website says, ‘We will not be looking at’ – I am paraphrasing – ‘cauterising or locking up any more national parks from that space,’ which is Gippsland, the Emerald Link and the north-east region. But it is not saying it will not lock up all of the Central Highlands, all of the great forest national park-slanted area. This would of course impact on some of the regions that Mr Bourman is talking about and some of the hunters that we are talking about in this debate today.

What we on this side want to see is proper, active management of public land. Things like out-of-control bushfire do not recognise land tenure. Pests and weeds – and we know that Mr Bourman has mentioned that in his contribution – do not recognise that they are now going into different land tenure and say, ‘Oh, gosh, I’d better stop.’ What we do recognise is that this government is cutting the knees out of our public service of boots on the ground, of people to look after those tracts, both in state forests and national parks. It is cutting funding, creating more headaches for vulnerable species and more proliferation of pests and weeds, and it is certainly going to compromise our native species. And not

to mention wild dogs – and these are wild dogs. One of my friends recently told me that only over the cup weekend they saw that they were a black shepherd cross type of dog and they were around hunters, actually being quite feral but also quite dangerous around those hunters.

In relation to the national parks, very sadly we saw in the *Weekly Times* – and I am aware of this document – that the state government is cutting the funding so much it is actually cutting back what are called essential services. I think it is a document that clearly shows that a number of must-do services will be cut, and there are some services that could occur if we had the money. But these are things like invasive feral pest management. This government are on one hand saying, ‘Let’s make new national parks over here. What about the central west, the great forest national park? We’ll think about something in the east, or not,’ but they are not looking after the public land that we have.

I want to understand. We know that the state of the environment report and the *State of the Forests* do not actually have forest care metrics. Why does this government not check? They shut a timber industry down because of what could happen to vulnerable species, but they are not actually doing any assessment on species in the public land estate, whether it be state forests or national parks, and I think that is a condemning offence. I think this motion could be stronger. The Nationals will support it, as we back our hunting fraternity in Victoria.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (16:25): It will come as no surprise that I rise to oppose this absurd and cruel motion today, but I do thank Mr Bourman for bringing it to the chamber and allowing me the opportunity to talk about the awful state of hunting and shooting here in Victoria.

Deer hunters have already received an additional approximately 90,000 hectares in the eastern alps and an extension of the deer stalking season in Baw Baw National Park in 2018. I have not heard a single complaint from them that they are struggling in the already existing killing range; in fact, as is highlighted in the motion, deer hunters are already killing a massive 140,000 deer per year. But not content with this, they are now asking to shoot alongside children on their family strolls when they are enjoying the beauty and peace of our national parks. They want children to learn that there is no place of peace, that they should expect to see weapons and hear the sounds of gunshots in their place of play and recreation. People should not have to witness the piles of carcasses left rotting and the destruction of our state’s nature at the hands of hunters. Our parks should be shared and peaceful places. As Ms Copey touched on, we have already seen areas of our land and recreational spaces locked away during the duck-shooting season to appease a very, very small minority. The safety of cyclists, children, families, runners, birdwatchers and every other national park user should not be an afterthought. This is the so-called sound rationale Mr Bourman is searching for.

We animal advocates are often told that we are too emotional, driven by compassion instead of rationale, yet I would argue that it is hunters and shooters who have this bizarre affliction. Hunters kill innocent animals which cannot defend themselves, in their own habitats. Introduced animals are here not through their own choices but our very own irresponsibility. Their status does not reduce their ability to suffer, and we have an obligation to them to make the kindest and the most ethical choices. I will not stand here today and claim that they are not doing damage to our environment, but the impact is in fact very, very overstated and used as justification for yet another thrill kill of an animal in this state. But what is more deadly to our environment than deer is the trudging of hunters on the ground – the litter and the disturbance to both flora and fauna as they hunt off designated paths.

What we also know is that shooting programs do not have any long-term impact on population numbers at all. It is a bandaid approach. For years now scientists and experts have been asking governments in this country to implement real and effective long-term solutions, and we know that this actually works. It has been proven overseas in wild horse populations in America with the use of simple immunocontraceptives, and the technology is readily available for us to try right here. We have continuously asked the government to fund this to protect our environment and native animals and to address the non-native species’ impact on biodiversity in a meaningful way that is not killing animals

for the sake of recreation. The environment is not our battleground. I condemn this motion before us and encourage all other members to do the same.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (16:29): We certainly have a diversity of opinions in this chamber. We have extremes from one end of the Nationals to the other of the Greens, who would generally and most commonly speak of doom and gloom – no matter what the issue being discussed the world is falling apart, the sky is falling in. However, the government here – the Labor Party – we can walk and chew gum. The role of government is to represent all Victorians, and that means that we can protect natural environments, we can protect biodiversity, but we can also ensure that there are places for people to get into nature, whether that is bushwalking, whether that is camping, whether that is fishing or whether that is hunting.

We know that deer numbers are well beyond what they should be and what they must be from an environmental perspective, the degradation that occurs in our natural spaces thanks to deer, the threat that deer pose to agricultural land and the threat that deer pose to Landcare groups and to farmers trying to revegetate property, let alone from getting into stock and whatnot and fencing. We simply must continue to ensure that deer numbers do not rise. We know that deer crossing roads is a really, really dangerous issue. It does not matter whether you are talking about the areas around the hills around Monbulk, Emerald and that sort of area in the state seat of Monbulk within the region of Eastern Victoria that I represent or South Gippsland or East Gippsland. We know that we need to reduce these numbers. Farmers and those that are trying to do regenerative work are all calling for this.

We have tens of thousands of hunters in Victoria who want to be out reducing deer numbers. As Mr Bourman has raised numerous times over the previous months and years, it is for food, which I am completely supportive of. I have met with locals around Gippsland, and they are looking at sausages, steaks and this sort of production, which can either be consumed here in Victoria or exported, and looking at mobile commercial abattoirs and ways that we can use this meat so it is not going to waste. I am remembering Mr Bourman's contribution from the past. We could be making sure we are feeding those that are hungry with programs like those that are being delivered in New Zealand. We should always look at ways that animals that are a nuisance and that are causing issues can be consumed.

Obviously, we know that there are very large economic benefits in the state from hunting. Ms Bath mentioned some of the towns in eastern Gippsland and other places where a lot of people are going through and getting accommodation or going to the pubs or going to the shops on the way through. There are something like 3000 people employed to service the industry and 50,000 licensed game hunters. Recreational hunting makes an estimated \$356 million contribution to the Victorian economy, and deer hunting contributes \$201 million of that total, so it is an incredible economic benefit. Mansfield sees in the vicinity of \$12 million of economic benefit, East Gippsland \$11 million and Latrobe \$9 million, so it is important for those regional communities. And it is important that we engage, as we do, with our First Nations communities on the management of these deer. It is an important and good opportunity to work together.

As I said earlier in the piece, we just absolutely need to get these numbers down, and we need sensible conversations so that this can happen. I completely agree with and understand anyone who does not want to see unnecessary animal cruelty, and as a society we are all trying to remove that in many, many walks and forms. Even since I was a kid I have thought there are far better practices across the board. But at the same time we need to bring a level of common sense to how farms are able to run and how land is managed so that we get good broad outcomes, whether it be for those farms or whether it be for other animals that are impacted by animals that are either crowding out or impacting them. We have seen that so much in Australia with so many introduced species, whether it be foxes or rabbits, obviously dogs and various cats. Cats obviously are a massive issue. We need to have sensible conversations about how we deal with these and how we ensure that we have the best environmental outcomes and the best outcomes for a majority of our animal species.

I would like to support this motion brought forward by Mr Bourman. I want to thank him for bringing it and I want to thank everyone for making a variety of contributions. I am proud that this government is able to work through a range of issues with our public spaces to ensure that the majority of Victorians get to appreciate them and get to spend time together out in the great outdoors, because it is so important that we remain connected to those spaces in our public lands.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (16:36): I would like to congratulate Mr Bourman on bringing this motion forward. Hunting is a very important industry. In the country it adds a lot of economic activity and provides a lot for our local communities. Hunting is not something that just country people do. In fact most of the hunters that come to regional Victoria come from Melbourne; a lot from the northern suburbs of Melbourne and a lot from the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Hunting makes an enormous economic contribution to the state. An assessment that was done on the economic contribution of hunting in Victoria in June 2020 by the government found that at that time it was around \$356 million that hunting provided in economic contribution and 3138 jobs. The vast majority of that economic contribution is to regional Victoria and to regional economies. In fact of that \$356 million, deer hunting accounted for over \$200 million. It is a very important contributor to our economic activity in regional Victoria.

Deer are not native to Australia; they are a feral species. What we are seeing currently is that we have an overpopulation of deer in this state. What is happening with the deer, because there is an overpopulation, is that they are not just in remote areas of the state, they are not just hidden away in the alpine areas, they are coming down into the urbanised areas and they are causing havoc on our roads. As I said, they are not native. They are hard-hoofed animals, so they do enormous environmental damage.

The government are happy to ban brumbies and to kill all the brumbies, and I know that they are supporting this motion as a way of controlling the deer species as well. I cannot understand the Greens not supporting this motion, because the Greens always say that they support the environment. In not supporting this motion, they are supporting non-native animals doing environmental damage in our state. With the Greens not supporting this motion, it shows just how shallow is the Premier's promise that even if she locks up public land as national parks, she will allow seasonal hunting to continue, because what we will see is the government doing a deal with Greens, when they need their vote for something, to ban that seasonal hunting in those national parks.

As I said, deer are hard-hoofed animals. They do environmental damage. They do a lot of environmental damage in our waterways because their hard hoofs do enormous damage as they are going down to water. But they also wallow near the waterways. They wallow to cool themselves down or to control parasites. But some of the wallows that are created by deer can be 2 to 3 metres wide and a metre deep. That does enormous environmental damage on the edge of waterways. They also do enormous environmental damage to trees by rubbing their antlers up and down the trees, an activity that they undertake called rutting.

These animals, which are now in enormous numbers, need to be controlled. What better way to allow them to be controlled than to allow recreational hunters to hunt these animals for food? They do not leave them lying around in the forest, as the Animal Justice Party and the Greens would have you imagine; they actually hunt these animals and take them home for food. Venison is well sought after. My own mother used to love to get some venison from some of my brother's friends who were shooters, and she loved having that venison in her freezer to use whenever she wanted it. There are many, many people who do use the meat from these animals. They do not just leave them to rot in the forest, unlike the government's shooting of brumbies, where those animals are being left to rot in our forests. It is terribly distressing for bushwalkers to come across horses that have been shot and left to rot in the forest. The Greens and the Animal Justice Party are quite happy to support that activity, but they are not happy for recreational shooters to responsibly go out and shoot these animals.

This would be a seasonal thing in the parks. It is not locking people out of the national parks at all. In fact it is opening the national parks up to more people by allowing the Greens and their bushwalking friends to have access to the parks at certain times and, for a very short period of time during a seasonal shoot, the shooters to have access to that park. But it would not be all parks, and it would not be all parks at all times.

I think that the Greens and the Animal Justice Party actually need to take a good hard look at themselves. They do need to do a lot of research to see why the government and the Liberals and Nationals will be supporting this motion. It is because it is good for the economy, it is good for the environment and it is good for the wellbeing and mental health of people who enjoy recreational shooting.

I will keep my contribution to those few remarks, but I congratulate Mr Bourman on bringing this motion to the Parliament, and I look forward to supporting it.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:43): I would like to thank Mr Bourman for bringing this motion to the house, which calls on the government to open appropriate tracts of applicable national parks at suitable times to recreational hunters to increase opportunities for Victoria's burgeoning recreational deer-hunting community. I think that there will be many people in the community who are not only very happy to see this motion but also happy to see the government's support for this motion. There have been many people fearful, including within my own party, of the government locking up land and locking up national parks so that various activities cannot be undertaken. Indeed I have been to a number of rallies recently – I know Mr Bourman was there also at many of them – where people were not only concerned about hunting deer but also concerned about prospecting, horseriding, the collection of firewood and many other activities. What we are actually talking about here is the possibility of opening up more national parks to be available for hunters to enter and shoot and hunt deer. I think this is a good thing.

It is undeniable – everyone knows it – that deer are not a native species and they do cause environmental damage. I do not think anyone argues otherwise. We do need to get their numbers down, and this is a good way of doing that, and it does not cost any money, really, compared to government programs where they shoot them from the air, which are very expensive. Allowing people to go out there with their families or friends actually generates economic activity in this state, as has been outlined by others. I got to witness some of this close-up quite recently. I went hiking with one of my sons up to the Howqua River near Mansfield in Alpine National Park and the adjacent area. It is a very beautiful area, and we were very lucky with beautiful weather. We hiked deep into the bush, and the first night there were not many other people around. On the second night a young man with a group turned up, and he had a rifle, and he was hiking to go and try and find some deer. He informed me that he did not find any, unfortunately. He was a bit disappointed about that, but he still had a good time anyway. Even though I am not a hunter myself, I can confirm that his presence did not alarm me or cause me any trouble whatsoever with his activities. Hiking and camping were totally compatible with him going in there and hunting. It is a very, very big forest there, an enormous forest.

I would also say that I would like to see more of this from the government, because there are many Victorians that see this as an important cultural activity. Many people have been doing it for generations. We need to remember that there are many different cultural activities in Victoria, and one of those is hunting. People like going out there and collecting food for their families. Indeed recently I was able to try some deer salami which someone made. It had wine in it, and it was very delicious. Many people enjoy eating venison with their families. It also can save money. If you have got a big freezer and you use the full carcass, that is a lot of food that can feed a family for a significant period of time. So many people can save money doing that, as well as having delicious wild food, and it is a great way of getting in touch with nature in our state.

Yes, we do need to get deer numbers down. I think everyone agrees that there are too many at the moment. They are causing environmental damage. This seems like a great way of doing that. I am

very happy to hear the government speak about this rather than locking up national parks. Yesterday I was concerned about locking climbers out of Mount Arapiles, which is another story, which I am quite disappointed about. At least we are talking about opening up parks to more activities, because after all these parks are owned by the people of Victoria and they should have access to them for whatever activities they want to engage in in those parks. I commend this motion to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:48): I also rise to speak on motion 600 by Mr Bourman today, a motion that I know is very dear to his heart. I am very excited to be making a contribution on a topic which is of some significance and importance as well. I note that in Mr Bourman's motion he talked about deer hunting being the premier hunting activity in Victoria, and also he referred to a burgeoning recreational deer-hunting community, and certainly the evidence does appear to bear that out.

Last year, with many other members in this place, including Mr Bourman, and with you, Acting President McArthur, I took part in the inquiry into Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements. We did see that the economic impact, the economic value of hunting activities as a whole to the state of Victoria, has indeed increased. What was actually interesting is that we saw that with some aspects of hunting their economic contribution was low, such as native bird hunting, and indeed it was native bird hunting that was seeing significant decreases in the amount of economic activity generated through those activities. Conversely, however, when it comes to pest species such as deer, we did actually see the numbers of deer hunting increase, and we also saw the economic impact of that deer hunting increase as well. I note that Mr Bourman in his remarks and indeed in the motion referred to the economic contribution of over \$200 million per year to the Victorian economy, and Mr McIntosh in his contribution helpfully broke down what those figures represent at a more localised regional level as well.

It is fair to say that certainly Victorian hunters are voting with their feet, and whilst the hunting of our recreational native birds appears to be diminishing and diminishing and diminishing, we are indeed seeing increasing numbers in deer hunting. Based on the emphasis in this motion from Mr Bourman that it is the premier hunting activity and it is a burgeoning part of the hunting community, it is certainly good to see that focus shift to those areas such as deer hunting. For many reasons, which have been outlined by previous contributions, deer are a significant pest species as well. Indeed Mr McIntosh spoke about the environmental impact of out-of-control deer populations in places in his region and in the parts of my region which border his – in communities such as Beaconsfield and Beaconsfield Upper in South-Eastern Metropolitan. In his examples of the areas of Monbulk, Pakenham and those broader areas as well we are seeing the impact that out-of-control deer are having. We are seeing the environmental destruction, and we are seeing the impact on native species as well. It is becoming an increasing concern for many of my constituents but many, many more of Mr McIntosh's constituents and those of other members in this place who do represent regional areas.

In noting that and in noting of course the need to control these populations as humanely as possible – it is not the deer's fault that they are here; they do not know any better. It was the damned fool who introduced them however many years ago, just like the damned fool that introduced rabbits to this place as well. But the fact remains that they are a problem, they are wreaking havoc, and measures that can further encourage, promote and support the control of these species are to be supported. It is indeed one of the reasons why the government members will be supporting this motion today.

We also know that we have the commitment to the open space and the places where deer hunting, amongst other pest species hunting, is enabled to thrive and to continue being supported by this government. Indeed I note the Premier's comments at the recent bush summit, where she reinforced and underlined that. I know that sent colleagues across the chamber – in fact we do not actually have any members of the opposition, either Liberal Party or National Party, here in the chamber at the moment, which is disappointing and seems to be all too frequent. Perhaps it is not a motion that is all too dear to them, Mr Bourman, but at least I acknowledge your advocacy on this issue, even if the Nationals and even if the Liberals cannot be bothered to be here. I know that the Premier's comments

resonated amongst those communities in regional Victoria. I will make one note, Acting President McArthur, that you are indeed here. I have marked you in your role as Acting President, though, and I know that you have a very good contribution to make, which I am sure will be memorable, as yours always are, following mine. But I do note that those comments were crystal clear on how this government sees the right of people to be able to have outdoor recreation in our state's many wonderful natural areas.

I know it is perhaps no longer observed as much as it is observed in the breach in this place, but I understand that there is a ruling from the Chair that members are supposed to stay for the speech after theirs. Ms Lovell was quick to leave the chamber immediately, even while Mr Limbrick was speaking. But I did find it interesting that the best she could say was that the Greens do not support this and as a result that means we cannot trust the Premier when she speaks on this issue, which is, quite frankly, bizarre. Oh, good to see you, Ms Lovell. It is, quite frankly, bizarre to draw that long bow between saying what the Greens party will do and what the government will do, because you have seen the track record of this government when it comes to supporting these matters, and that is something that will absolutely continue under the leadership of Jacinta Allan.

As I said, I have spoken before in this place about my support for the humane and sensible control of deer populations, especially in these outer urban and regional areas where they have been causing such havoc. Indeed in that same inquiry to which I referred earlier we did in fact have a draft recommendation that was put forward by our chair Mr Batchelor, who is also in the room, which would have directly gone to the issue of deer hunting. As we know, the recommendation of the report was for a different outcome on recreational native bird hunting. However, one draft recommendation, which was provisionally entitled recommendation 5, which members can find on page 220 of the report, was that the Game Management Authority should focus on supporting and expanding game hunting for non-native species such as deer, fox and rabbit to assist with the control of these invasive species – an entirely and eminently sensible recommendation, I would have thought.

I completely understand it was moved by Ms Copsey that that be removed, and indeed I understand her motivations, as indeed I understand Ms Purcell and her motivations for voting against that as well. But it was nevertheless curious to see Ms Bath, Mr Mulholland and, yes, Mr Bourman himself vote against that motion, and I am disappointed that as a result of those votes the draft recommendation from that report was kaput, was no more, and as a result we were not able to make that recommendation to government. However, in my remarks on the report I did nevertheless outline my support for that as a much more reasonable and effective way for hunters to continue hunting in a way that is not impacting on our native bird species. But what is certainly clear to see, based on the results of those economic impacts in particular, is that hunters are voting with their feet. They are supporting the hunting and the control of pest species such as foxes and such as rabbits as well as of course but also in particular deer for all of the reasons that have been gone through.

I know I do not have any personal experience with hunting deer, or any animal for that matter. It is not for me. For those that do, it is something that they can do. I do not know what is involved in particular, and in fact given the economic impact that is generated, you might even say that it is a dear thing to do. Nevertheless, for the reasons I have gone through and for the reasons that other members have so well articulated in this place as to the environmental impact that out-of-control wild deer are having on our native flora and fauna, I am pleased to support this motion and commend it to the house.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (16:58): I am pleased to support Mr Bourman's motion. Thank you for bringing it to the chamber. Deer hunting is not just a premier hunting activity, it is an essential part of Victoria's conservation strategy, contributing significantly to maintaining ecological balance.

I was pleased to recently support a very important petition to ensure that the licences of recreational hunters are expanded in order to end the aerial culling of deer. It is unfair that hunters paying a licence fee to the Game Management Authority will have their opportunities to hunt limited, but I equally

have massive reservations about the ability of Parks Victoria to run a proper operation to contract out deer control to the private sector. For reasons of organisational competence as well as fairness to licence-holders and preferable welfare outcomes for the culled deer, it would be far better and cheaper left in the hands of properly licensed Victorian hunters. For the purpose of the exercise, I might read out the petition, which has already garnered 2677 petitioners:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that aerial culling of deer in areas that can be hunted by recreational hunters needs to end. Aerial culling is extremely expensive, imprecise and animal welfare standards are not kept as animals are shot to stop, not shot to kill.

Aerial culling of deer in western Victoria and other parts of the State is being conducted in areas where recreational hunters have paid license fees to hunt deer. With fees set to increase, this is even more insulting as hunters are expected to pay more for less opportunities. These license fees could be used to fix rural roads and infrastructure rather than wasted on expensive helicopter culling with mixed results.

Many hunters use venison to supplement their groceries and given the cost-of-living crisis the culling of these animals is leading to the waste of perfectly good venison that could be used or donated to charities with government assistance. We call on the Government to confine aerial culling to locations where recreational hunters are not allowed and encourage more recreational hunters to get out to help with deer control.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to stop the aerial culling of deer in areas that can be hunted by recreational hunters.

That makes complete sense, and hopefully the government will listen when Mr Bourman presents that petition.

Deer hunting offers significant benefits to farmers by helping to control the deer population, which, if left unchecked, can cause extensive crop damage and impact local agriculture. Overpopulated deer herds consume and trample crops, leading to economic losses for farmers and increased food prices. This management approach is a practical, sustainable solution that supports farmers' livelihoods, promotes biodiversity and ensures that rural communities can thrive.

Deer hunting can also help curb the spread of diseases like chronic wasting disease, which can affect both wildlife and potentially livestock. Deer hunting provides a sustainable source of lean, organic meat which is often donated to food banks or consumed by hunters, reducing food waste and promoting food security. If Parks Victoria does aerial culling, those carcasses are left to rot or to be fed on by wild dogs and foxes and other vermin – we just had a debate about wild dogs, so there is no point in providing food for them. I look forward to seeing all of you tomorrow at the second annual Hunters for the Hungry game meat barbecue. There will be vegetarian and vegan options too – I do not know why they would want to be there, but it is a great opportunity to learn more about sustainable, locally sourced food.

Moreover, the financial benefits of deer hunting are considerable; \$200 million goes into Victoria's rural economy each year, supporting local jobs and businesses and bringing substantial benefits to small communities and regional tourism.

With growing deer populations across the state, it is important to protect our native flora and fauna by reducing overgrazing and the competition deer pose to other wildlife. This activity of licensed hunters doing the shooting prevents overpopulation and reduces the strain on local ecosystems, which can lead to healthier forests and agricultural areas. I do not know whether those people inside the tram tracks are aware that during the rutting season deer completely demolish tree populations. They ringbark trees and kill them, so they do extensive damage to the environment at that time of the cycle.

I have to say to the government – as I have said on numerous occasions – locking up the forests and throwing away the keys is not the answer to maintaining the forests. As Mr Limbrick says, forests and national parks are for the people. They own them. Parks Victoria does not own them, the government does not own them, the so-called environmentalists or the Greens do not own them. They are for everybody to use. This extraordinary performance of the government recently of trying to stop rock climbing is –

David Limbrick interjected.

Bev McARTHUR: just insane, as Mr Limbrick has just reminded me – totally insane, totally unnecessary. Rock climbers are the most environmentally conscious users of the environment that you could possibly find, and it is absolutely outrageous that you would consider ending rock climbing in certain areas of Victoria. There is no justification whatsoever.

I was pleased to be on the duck-hunting inquiry, and I am exceptionally pleased that the government did not accept the recommendation. That was the best part about it. Thanks to your friends in the union movement I think, who aided and abetted, common sense prevailed within the government leadership ranks to ensure that duck hunting continues in this state. What a good thing! At least somebody gets in the ear of government and gets the answer right.

Hunting is also a longstanding tradition for Indigenous Australians, fostering a deep connection with nature, encouraging responsible wildlife stewardship and preserving cultural heritage. According to a Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions report titled *Traditional Owner Game Management Strategy*:

... deer are sometimes hunted for food (considered good game quality similar to kangaroo) ... Traditional Owners consider deer as animals which negatively impact on the health of Country causing destruction to delicate and endangered ecosystems and risks to associated cultural values.

On so many counts encouraging licensed deer hunters to cull deer is a good thing. There are no negatives attached to it. The negatives are encouraging Parks Victoria to do the culling because, as I have said, the deer will be left to rot. They will not kill them humanely, especially from the air. It is much better that we have licensed deer hunters doing the culling, and we are going to be saving the taxpayers money. What is not to like about that? Whether it is for conservation, economic support or the tradition of ethical hunting, deer hunting deserves our support.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (17:07): I will be brief. I will mainly go on the Greens' contribution because it was kind of funny. 'Self-serving' I was called. Well, of course. Have a look at the party name – it is pretty self-evident.

There was also locking people out whilst we go shooting things off paths next to kids and all that. I invite the Greens, or anyone else, to show me one part of the state where people are locked out for recreational hunting. They are for culling for safety reasons, as I said, but I am not aware of anywhere. Lambasting hunters and stating how little they remove and then telling everyone how bad the deer are is another problem with the Greens' mindset, because it is ideology. They should be wanting us to get rid of more deer as long as it is safe. I do not get it. Hunters for the Hungry – we are still working on that. I would love for that to get through. Tomorrow there is the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia game meat luncheon. There will be vegan and vegetarian options available for all of those who want them.

David Limbrick: Very inclusive, Jeff.

Jeff BOURMAN: I try to be, Mr Limbrick. Back to my motion, this is about appropriateness. This is not opening up all lands everywhere and everything. It is about doing it in the right place, at the right time and in the right way. I am really pleased that the government has got on board, and I thank everyone, even the Greens and the Animal Justice Party, for their contributions, because that is what democracy is all about.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (32): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Gaele Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Harriet Shing,

Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Noes (6): Katherine Copsey, David Ettershank, Sarah Mansfield, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell

Motion agreed to.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Victoria State Emergency Service

Report 2023–24

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (17:16): I rise today to deliver a statement on the Victoria State Emergency Service Authority report 2023–24. VICSES is at the front of my mind, as I recently visited their Fawkner brigade to inspect their new next-gen heavy rescue truck, which is one of 35 heavy rescue trucks being rolled out across the state, thanks to \$15.1 million in funding from the Allan Labor government, and it is very much supported by the Minister for Emergency Services. This is in addition to 21 heavy rescue trucks, which were secured with another round of government funding in the last budget. It was an eye-opening experience for me to be present at the Fawkner brigade, as my local SES, and to thank the volunteers, who really are experts in what they do. I had the chance to inspect a new truck and hear how some of the volunteers had provided feedback on all of its specifications. It was quite extraordinary.

I also am looking forward to visiting their VICSES unit in Yackandandah. In addition to providing invaluable emergency support services to the Yackandandah community, their SES unit is in fact playing its part in reducing its emissions as part of the Totally Renewable Yackandandah initiative. I look forward to meeting Jackie, the unit controller, and hearing about how her unit are taking advantage of solar power generation and a renewable battery to drive down their emissions and save money on their energy bills. I am also looking forward to meeting some of the volunteers who work with Jackie.

Emergency services volunteers truly are the lifeblood of any community in Victoria, and I am so encouraged to see in this report that VICSES retains a statewide volunteer pool of 5002 members – there you go. I have a huge amount of respect for our emergency services volunteers. I always love to see that respect mirrored by emergency services agencies, and that is why I was very pleased to see that a number of pastoral care and further training services are being made available by VICSES to their volunteers, including proactive mental health care and leadership courses. I was also proud to see in this report that VICSES has been the recipient of an additional \$2.45 million in volunteer emergency services equipment program funding from the government and Minister Symes, and I look forward to visiting some other VESEP grant recipients as I travel around north-east Victoria in the coming months and visit other regional areas of our state.

Can I also note with some concern the large number of extreme weather events to which VICSES responded over the last 12 months, and in fact VICSES volunteer hours attributed to storm incidents have increased by 107 per cent in the past year. While this report is clearly a testament to the tireless efforts of these volunteers, it is also a reminder that without bold action today, climate change will have severe consequences for generations to come. That is why I am so passionate about this government's bold climate change agenda – climate action agenda, in fact, is the best way to phrase it – led by Minister D'Ambrosio in the other place. Our ambitious emissions reduction targets are key to combating climate change and ensuring extreme weather events do not become catastrophically common in the future. Just last week I received some briefings from academic experts at Monash University and Victoria University about, amongst other things, the importance of effective communication between emergency services bodies and multicultural communities. I am very glad to

see that in this report VICSES have been translating their materials for linguistically diverse communities, which were identified as the materials most needing translation during VICSES's community engagement.

I will end by briefly reflecting on VICSES's vision statement at the very beginning of their report: 'Safer communities – together'. All of us have come to work in this place because we care about our communities and want to see them thrive. Throughout this report that was so evident, and what gets me excited about emergency services is that shared passion for community. I look forward to talking to VICSES members directly over the coming days, weeks and months ahead as we discuss this government's commitment to growing safer communities together with emergency services like VICSES.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2024–25

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:20): I want to reflect on two matters, both coming out of the state budget. One is the output that deals with transport and the other deals with the energy sector. People in the community but also in the chamber will have seen extraordinary articles over the last two days that deal with the waste-to-energy issue. Waste to energy was shepherded through this chamber a year or so ago, and certainly the opposition sees that it can play a significant role in our net zero objectives and at the same time provide a useful contribution to waste management.

There are clearly alternatives that can operate here, and there are several different options, but what struck me is the hypocritical approach of a number of government members, including the Minister for Energy and Resources, who were on one hand speaking highly of waste to energy but on the other oppose a waste-to-energy project near the minister's electorate in the north of the city. This is hypocrisy writ large. Waste to energy has a significant role, and the Liberals and Nationals support waste to energy as one aspect of viable programs to deal with net zero objectives. But what we do not support is a hypocritical approach which opposes waste to energy. We have seen this across a number of government members, including in particular the minister for energy, who has opposed local projects.

I also want to say something today noting the transport output and the importance of bus services. The chamber debated a great deal about bus services today, but I do want to put on record a number of points here. It is very clear from recent research that there is a huge delay in the provision of bus services on the edge of the city. We know from academic work that has been done that there is a massive delay – up to five years in Victoria – and a number of recent studies look at Victoria and Melbourne as a case study and indicate that three, four and five years is common and in some cases it is up to 12 years after the creation of suburbs and new estates before there is the provision of any bus services whatsoever.

Noting that this government has been in power since 1999 minus the four years between 2010 and 2014 – of the last 25 years, the government has been in power for 21 of those years – the despicable and terrible state of our bus services is entirely the fault of this government and their mismanagement. The delays in providing buses at the edge of the city and in the growth areas is entirely the responsibility of Labor and the current minister and the ministers before them.

Michael Galea interjected.

David DAVIS: No, that is the truth of the matter – there has been a shocking failure to provide those bus services. It is a shocking outcome. I note that the government has also targeted the bus industry for its ideological approach. They have forced out a number of small family bus businesses. As of 30 June next year a number of these will be shoved off, pushed away; no compensation – some of them have been in the family business for up to a hundred years in some cases, providing bus services. But this is all about ideology; it is all about a union-driven approach so that they can get

larger, foreign-owned groups in to take over the family-run bus services. That is what this government is doing, and it is particularly driven by Jacinta Allan.

They were forced to forestall these changes in the period leading up to the 2018 election, but then after that, after they came back, they went nuts and went after these bus groups. I have got to say the country ones are in their guns for the period from 2026 to 2032, trying to roll over them but at the same time not compensating them for the work that they have done over a long period – not even a letter, not even a thankyou. I know the Treasurer has been very clear: you are not getting increased bus services, because they are too costly. I say they are a right for many people. Many people need those bus services, particularly in the regional and – *(Time expired)*

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:25): I rise to speak on the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's October 2024 report on the state education system in Victoria. As a member of the committee, I heard firsthand from stakeholders across the state about their experiences with Victoria's once nation-leading education system and their vision for its future. Although there were undoubtedly differences of opinion, overall it was clear that all of those who contributed to the inquiry, and my colleagues, want to see Victoria's education system blossom to become world class. We claim to be the Education State, but if we want to keep that title believable, we must act on the findings of this report, of which there are many.

Before delving into the specifics of the report, I would also like to reflect on a related issue that I raised in this chamber last week; that is, dedicated housing for essential service workers, including teachers. Teachers deserve to live in the communities that they teach in. They should have job opportunities based on their merit, not on their ability to afford to live in the area where they work. The lack of affordable housing was a key issue raised by most of the teachers we spoke to, as was attracting people to the profession. So I feel it is a no-brainer that this government consider incentives for essential workers such as our teachers to be supported into affordable housing.

Turning to the report itself, I would like to begin by highlighting some of the recommendations I believe are particularly important to the future of our Education State. Recommendation 3 is that this government ensures:

... that practical life skills such as ... budgeting ... taxation and civic engagement are taught in schools at pre-VCE levels.

This is such an important recommendation. When we teach these kinds of skills, we are helping dismantle entrenched inequality and poverty by giving kids the skills they will need to help themselves when they need to. At present we largely rely on families to teach these skills. Inevitably children receive inconsistent advice or no advice at all on these essential life skills. Many families have not received this advice themselves, so how can we expect them to be able to teach it?

I was also pleased to see finding 10, which states:

There is a growing view among students, teachers and education experts that ... non-academic student outcomes measures should be incorporated in school assessment to provide a broader reflection of student achievement.

As someone who did not always have a positive experience at school, I struggled to engage academically, but I still had so much more to offer. I often wonder: if my school had focused on more personalised experiences rather than a one-size-fits-all approach of academic excellence, maybe I would have been more engaged.

Unsurprisingly, during the inquiry a very small number of people raised concerns about the teaching of gender diversity, sexuality, relationships and sex education in schools, often with reference to Respectful Relationships and Safe Schools programs. Although we did receive strong endorsements

of these programs, we also saw some people suggest they did not have a place in our education system. There was talk of politicising schools, implying that identity is in some way a choice, as if it was as simple as who you are and who you should be. Children deserve schools that are equipped to understand and listen to them as they grow up and understand their place in this world. Any attempt to erase that opportunity is shameful and setting kids up for failure.

Before concluding, I would like to give a shout-out to my colleague Aiv Puglielli for his minority report. In particular I want to echo his comments about the need for strict needs-based funding for both public and private schools, access to mental health services in schools, teachers being underpaid and overworked and opportunities to support LGBTIQ+ students in the schooling system. The learning and growing that children do in our schools often determines the path that they will follow in life. We owe it to our Victorian children to give them the best environment to learn and explore in. With that in mind, I look forward to seeing the government's considered response to this report in due course.

Department of the Legislative Council

Report 2023–24

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:30): I rise to speak on the Department of the Legislative Council's annual report and specifically on the work that the Victorian Parliament has done with regard to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Last week I was privileged to join eight fellow MPs from both chambers here and three of our magnificent clerks to visit Sydney for the annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. It was wonderful to have our friends and neighbours New South Wales be the hosts this year. It was an incredibly well run conference. I would like to give a particular mention to the conference chair Ben Franklin, the outgoing President of the Legislative Council in New South Wales, who ran an absolutely superb conference that was done consummately well, and also acknowledge the many wonderful staff from the New South Wales Parliament who supported us all week. It was a well-attended event and well supported by the CPA, in particular the outstanding secretary-general Mr Stephen Twigg and his team.

Amongst many interesting events, we had a very engaging lecture from the great Michael Kirby on the role of discrimination and the work that has been done in the Commonwealth, particularly with regard to human rights and how the Commonwealth charter, that he helped draft, calls on us to be implacably opposed to discrimination of all kinds. It was a really, really engaging speech.

We also had the vote for the new chair of the CPA following the election loss of the outgoing chair in the UK election this year, and we had three strong candidates. Dr Chris Kalila from Zambia, the Honourable Arthur Holder from Barbados and Zainab Gimba from Nigeria all throw their hats into the ring. It was a very exciting, close-fought race, with Dr Chris Kalila winning by a single vote. I would like to acknowledge both him and all the candidates, in particular the Honourable Arthur Holder from Barbados, which will be the host of the next year's conference, who showed incredible fortitude and very strong engagement when it comes to those principles of discrimination that were spoken about by Mr Kirby.

We saw all the excitement of raw politics in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. In particular it was wonderful to catch up once again with some of our wonderful Commonwealth youth parliamentarians. I spoke previously in this place about my time in New Zealand as a mentor for the Commonwealth Youth Parliament. It was really terrific to see in particular Dolph from Nauru, Jack from Jersey, Olly from Gibraltar and Kokulaan and India from New South Wales. It was great to spend some more time with them. I know they enjoyed meeting some other Victorian MPs as well.

As the voting delegate the main reason that I attended the conference this year was to speak at a workshop. Last year's conference was held in Ghana in the midst of some rather distressing laws that that country was bringing in with regard to gay people. It was really good to see a changed tone in Sydney this year. I was privileged to present and lead a workshop which was about LGBTIQ+ participation in our parliaments. It was incredibly good to be joined by other speakers, including Tina

Browne, the Leader of the Opposition in the Cook Islands, who have recently decriminalised same-sex activity, the United Nations Development Programme and others.

It was great to be able to share my experiences and those of others from this chamber and also to engage in that really valuable conversation with MPs from across the Commonwealth, an overwhelmingly positive conversation, it has to be said, with really good feedback, including from the Honourable Arthur Holder from Barbados, from members of English and Welsh parliaments and members of parliament from India and Ghana, which was particularly good to see. There were some less positive contributions as well, and I will not dwell too long on them for the sake of brevity. Overall, it was an incredibly good experience to be part of that conversation, a respectful conversation, which it was and which it needs to be as well. Indeed it is a conversation that is still in many parts of the Commonwealth in its infancy but one which we have an important role as members of a Parliament such as here in Victoria to engage in, to have those conversations in a respectful but firm manner.

I would particularly like to thank the support of all of my Victorian colleagues who were there with me and strongly showed their support – most particularly of all, though, to you, President, for your extreme support and for proving what it is to be a genuine ally.

Department of Transport and Planning

Report 2023–24

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:35): I rise to speak on the Department of Transport and Planning's annual report 2023–24. And surprise, surprise, what will I be talking about in that report? Roads. I think we have seen some articles over the last couple of days that have shown us just how poorly this government is doing on resurfacing and rehabilitation work with roads in this state. In fact this afternoon I had some friends who were driving up to the country who texted me to say how bad the roads were, and my response was, 'Welcome to the country,' because that is the state of the roads right across regional Victoria. In fact they suggested that I got a few corflutes and put them up to say the potholes were the project of the Allan Labor government. The trouble is you cannot put them on roads, but I would love to do that because it is true. It is a project of the Allan Labor government because they are deliberately ignoring the needs of country Victorians for the maintenance of our road network.

What we saw in an article over the weekend was that the government have actually slashed the rehabilitation and resurfacing work that has been done by a staggering 95 per cent in regional areas. In 2022–23 the road area treated was close to 9 million square metres, and in the 2023–24 year it was just 422,000 square metres. So we know that the Allan Labor government are ignoring the needs of regional roads. They slashed spending on resurfacing from \$201 million to \$37 million in that period. And there were delays in rolling out the projects in the 2023–24 year. They only achieved 69 per cent of the program of regional projects finished on time, so these projects are getting fewer and they are taking longer to do.

Recently they made a big splash of packaging up a whole heap of little projects and saying, 'We're going to spend \$964 million on the resurfacing of roads.' But it was too little, and it was too late. Many of our roads have been in a disgraceful condition for years. Drivers are reporting damage to their cars, and they are not being compensated for it by this government. In that \$964 million, of the 11 districts that are within my region of Northern Victoria there were four that did not get a single project. One of those that did was the Premier's own electorate of Bendigo East. One of them was the Speaker's electorate, Bendigo West. Also, in Murray Plains and Eildon there was not a single road in those electorates that was to be upgraded. The Premier's own electorate of Bendigo East actually has an intersection, the intersection of Howard Street and Midland Highway, that was voted by the RACV the worst intersection in the state, and yet it does not get any funding. The Melba Highway in the seat of Eildon was voted the worst road in Victoria, and yet it is not getting any maintenance or resurfacing done to it this year by the state government under this program. The Melba Highway – the minister actually went out and named that when she announced the project. She said to the cameras, 'Yes,

we're going to upgrade the Melba Highway,' but it is not on the list. It was on the list given to the media, but it is not on the official list, and there are other roads that were on the list given to the media but not on the official list.

In my electorate – and my electorate is about 46 per cent of the land mass of Victoria – less than 32 kilometres of road will be treated. In the seat of Shepparton it is 1.4 kilometres. In Yan Yean it is just 290 metres of road. Yan Yean has some of the worst roads – Yan Yean Road, Donnybrook Road – in this state, and just 290 metres is going to be treated. In Benambra it is 1.36 kilometres; Ovens Valley, 1.6 kilometres; Euroa, a little bit better, 8.5; Mildura, 5.1; and Macedon, 13.6. It is not nearly enough for roads in regional Victoria.

Petitions

St Joseph's Christian college

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:41): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

It is my great privilege to stand here in support of a petition of 4730 Victorians, who have petitioned in this place in support of St Joseph's Christian college in Yuroke. These Victorians have come together to call on the government to simply get out of the way and allow the Assyrian Church of the East community to build this school on their own land on Mickleham Road.

On the surface the petition I am presenting on behalf of my constituents, and our constituents, is about a planning issue, asking the Legislative Council to call on the state Labor government to approve the St Joseph's Christian college proposal and reconsider it with due regard to the significant community backing. At its core it is about so much more than that.

The petitioners are asking the government to respect their faith and allow them to build a school that will allow them to raise and educate their children in their faith, aligned with the doctrines of the Assyrian Church of the East. The school will offer a specialised curriculum tailored to meet their unique religious and cultural needs, which are currently unmet by systemic education. Another benefit is that the school will teach the Assyrian language as a core subject, ensuring the preservation of the native tongue, which is a UNESCO-listed endangered language. The Assyrian language and its Aramaic dialects are among the oldest continuously spoken and written languages in the world. It is also the language that was spoken by Jesus Christ himself.

I have had the opportunity to spend a great deal of time with this community, led by his grace bishop Mar Benyamin Elya, Father Antawan and Father Maurice, the reverend fathers, and I know that they are a close-knit, hardworking community of Christians who seek to raise and educate communities in their faith.

Why is faith in education important? I think it is summed up best by the founder of my party, Sir Robert Menzies, who told a church gathering in 1944 that Christianity:

... begins its teaching by imposing on every citizen the obligation of unselfishness, of thinking of the interests of his neighbour before his own, and regarding himself as his brother's keeper.

These are precisely the values that the Assyrian Church community seek to raise their children to hold through education at their own school – St Joseph's Christian college – and exactly the kinds of values I hope my children will be raised to hold and to cherish. Sadly, there is a real shortage of faith-based schools, particularly in my electorate. Many Catholic and Christian schools, like Kolbe Catholic College or St Mary orthodox college in Coolaroo, have long waiting lists.

The school is not demanding any special favours. They have taken the initiative of purchasing two parcels of land and have done the right thing by following every rule in the rule book to get planning approval from the state government. Many Labor MPs have visited the site in Yuroke with the church leadership, assured the church community that it will all be okay in submitting planning applications

and celebrated their submitting planning applications, as they were encouraged to do by the department in 2023. The school has complied with multiple requests for change, including – I think disappointingly – having to downscale in size and not go all the way to year 12 and having to change intersections multiple times. They have spent a lot of money on legal fees, money that could have been spent on educating students. They held two compulsory conferences with the Department of Transport and Planning, and in the church's view the department kept moving the goalposts.

I note there appears to be some confusion in the department about Hume City Council's position on this proposal. The council have made it very clear that they do not actually oppose the school. They have never opposed the school, and I want to know who in the government has made the mistake of believing that Hume City Council did. The important point, I think, is that the department and the government, by extension, have made it clear that they do not want a school on Mickleham Road, because it will cause traffic congestion and they do not want a school zone. This is despite Labor fast-tracking the *Craigieburn West Precinct Structure Plan*, the PSP, which will bring 8000 homes and all manner of related congestion, against the wishes of the council – Hume City Council actually opposed that – and the local community. But no, it is the school that will cause traffic, despite the 200-metre setback. Similar setbacks exist at Aitken College on Mickleham Road, which is a well-established school. I think it is important the government get on with it and support the school and support the almost 5000 people that have signed this petition.

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (17:46): I am pleased to rise and speak on the proposed St Joseph's Christian college in Yuroke, an issue very close to my heart and I know very close to the heart of many in my community. I want to also begin by acknowledging that I see so many friends in the gallery today, and it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge Reverend Father Morris Daoud from the Assyrian Church of the East. Also, I can see in the gallery former mayor of Hume City Council Joseph Haweil and Cr John Haddad, long-time friends of mine and friends of the Assyrian community, who have advocated strongly on this project.

What I will say, as one of the two Labor members for the Northern Metropolitan Region and as a resident of Greenvale, is I know how important it is to establish the St Joseph's Christian college in our community. I understand that the journey to this stage has been long and at times has been quite stressful, but I want to reassure everybody that the Allan Labor government and I share the community's desire to see a school built. We recognise the significant growth of the Assyrian community in Melbourne's north, and several government MPs have been advocating very strongly within government – within a government that can deliver. In particular, I want to give a shout-out to Ros Spence in the other place, the member for Kalkallo, and also Iwan Walters, the member for Greenvale, who have raised this issue with other cabinet ministers and with the Premier and are strongly advocating for this school. I can understand that their steadfast advocacy is motivated by a strong desire for the Assyrian families in our community to be able to choose the education for their children that encapsulates their faith, language and culture.

I know my time is limited, but again I think it is relevant to acknowledge the Assyrian people in context as one of the longest surviving civilizations today. After a long journey on which they have suffered quite significant persecution, they have come here and are making a really positive contribution in our community. How lucky I feel to have such a large Assyrian community in Melbourne's north. It is a community that has contributed so much to humankind, whether it be from the Babylonian codes or the Sumerian ziggurats. It is a culture that still survives today, and that is due to the resilience and faith of the community.

I would note that the process, as has been discussed, is going through VCAT at the moment, and I am limited in what I can say in relation to that process because, as the planning process is an independent process, I do not want to politicise that process, understanding that that will only lead to a suggestion of interference in an independent tribunal. Also, I think what the opposition are trying to do is to stoke division on this motion and be quite deceptive in relation to these matters. Understand, as a

government, we will continue to work; there is that process in place. But, regardless, we will continue to work with you, and in this term of government I would like to see progress in relation to the school.

In terms of our work and in terms of faith-based schools, it is important, because as a government we believe in the right of people to choose. Choice is important in education, and opportunity is important, and in our community in the north we need more opportunities and more choice. Obviously, a lot of young families like mine, young Middle Eastern families, do have a lot of children, and I think the point is that we do need schools that fit our values. I know the Assyrian community are very connected with their culture in that regard, and these schools instil those traditions and values. I look forward to supporting them.

In our community alone there is a reference to some of the schools, but no government in the history of the state has invested more in schools – and not just government schools. Some of the independent ones that just come to mind are Kolbe Catholic College, which many of you will be familiar with – our government supported them with their Greenvale Mickleham campus. Mary Queen of Heaven Primary School and Aitken College in Greenvale, Penola Catholic College in Broadmeadows and Glenroy and Oscar Romero Catholic Primary School in Craigieburn are just some examples of where the government has worked with the independent school sector. Non-government and faith-based schools are an essential part of Victoria's education system, with over a third of students studying in Catholic or independent schools, and I can confirm that our government will work in continued partnership with the church and the Assyrian community to deliver a school for your community. It will happen.

The Allan Labor government is and always will be a government focused on education. We do not just talk about schools; we build them. An example that comes to mind is 2018. The opposition promised four schools – four in the whole state. From 2018 to now we have promised 100 schools, and almost all have been delivered already. If we say we are going to do it, we will get on with it. We do not just talk about it.

I think faith-based schools are important. It is important to share that culture because when our young people are connected to culture and have a sense of belonging it leads to better outcomes. I am also a minister in other portfolios, and I see that for young people to strive and achieve, they need to be connected to culture and family, and schools and communities are an important part of that. But like I said, it is only Labor governments that build schools, and I look forward to continuing work with the Assyrian community to make progress in this term of government.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:51): I am really very pleased to stand and speak on this petition. It is a really important petition because it represents a genuine need in the community that has been overlooked, ignored, stymied, hindered and, in some senses, harassed. The school is important. This has been triggered by the delivery of 4730 signatures from the community, and these are from across Melbourne, including my seat of North-East Metro. Many people are from Mill Park, Bundoora and South Morang and are members of this community who would value this school.

The school, as has been mentioned, will do important things. It will preserve language, it will foster culture, it will provide education in an area that significantly needs education facilities made for it and it will preserve faith. Let us not forget, faith is not a marginal thing in our community; faith is a mainstream thing in our community, and sometimes I think we are gaslighted into believing that faith is somehow marginal in our community. It is not; it is central. It always has been central in Australian society, and the Assyrian community should participate in that tradition alongside the rest of us where that faith is mainstream. The importance of faith-based education is the perpetuation of values – the values that you have as a community. You are in a sense defined by your values, and if you cannot pass them on successfully, you lose those values and you lose a significant and meaningful part of your identity.

In talking to some members of the community and from looking at other data points, it is perplexing how difficult this application process has become and why it has become so difficult, because clearly the community has done everything in its power to be accommodating, everything in its power to be flexible and everything at its expense to do so, and yet simultaneously across the road far more draconian changes were being made and swept through and approved. We would note that Ros Spence sits in cabinet across from the Minister for Planning and can on any day speak to the Minister for Planning, call this project in and have it approved. The government has had no hesitation in doing that and pushing through planning changes in other suburbs where it wants to build high-rise flats or where it wants to make draconian changes – just not here, just not for this community and just not for this school. That is why you have been forced to raise a petition and use your democratic voice in this way, and I commend you for it.

The permit was provided to the department in July 2023. They made multiple changes, they attended compulsory conferences with the Department of Transport and Planning, they accommodated the changes and they addressed the issues of traffic congestion – and if something has a 200-metre setback, it is incomprehensible to me or to any logical person how this has not addressed the issue. I can only imagine the frustration of the community rising as this occurred. Again, we do not know why it has not been supported. It is a no-brainer; it should be supported. I am very pleased that we can add a little bit extra to their voice in getting this, hopefully, across the line, and I am pleased to hear from the other side that suddenly this has support. What we would like to see is not lip-service; what we would like to see is action.

We have a tradition in this society that as different communities have moved to Australia, as different multicultural communities have arrived in the past, we have almost fallen over ourselves to make sure they are welcome, that they have community centres, that they have somewhere to meet and somewhere to commune, but not in this case. It is such an anomaly in this case, and it makes no sense. I commend the community for raising their voice. I commend my colleague Mr Mulholland for bringing it to Parliament and giving that voice expression here in this chamber. I would conclude by saying that this is an important project for a growing area that needs infrastructure. It is time for the government to get out of the way and let the Assyrian Church of the East build their much-needed school.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:56): I also rise in support of the petition that has been sponsored by my colleague Evan Mulholland. This petition is incredibly important to this community. They have travelled a long way to be here today, and some of these people, a handful of these people, were here at the time we debated the Lord's Prayer. It is incredibly important for people who have survived persecution and come here with their faith to be able to maintain that faith in a country that says it is free and that cherishes democracy and opportunity. It is incredibly important when people come from another country and are promised great things in this nation that we deliver to support these communities that we bring out.

I have been to a service in the northern region that commemorates those that have lost their lives and commemorates family that remembers the persecution. I cannot imagine what many of these people that are here today have gone through and what their families have gone through, and they come here with a great hope and a willingness to contribute to this community. I have had the great pleasure of meeting many of these people more than once, and some of them I have just met today, and I know that this is incredibly important to them, to have a school that is going to reflect their language, their culture and their values.

I myself made a decision not only to raise my kids in faith-based schools but also to teach in them and to work in them, because I too wanted to have the opportunity to raise my children with the values that I was raised with, where I grew up, also with parents who had come from another country and who came here with values that were incredibly important to them. In my dad's case, he was a minority in his country. I really appreciate and value the fact that these people have gone to a lot of time and effort but also money – money has been invested in order to comply with the wishes of a member for the

Northern Metropolitan Region Mr Erdogan, who had encouraged planning applications and encouraged them to take on this opportunity. This application, as we have heard in this place already today, was provided to the department in July 2023.

The application for a school has gone through multiple requests for change, even to the point that they have been disappointed to say that they have had to downscale a whole lot of things because of an intersection. They have also spent a significant amount of money on legal fees. That is, to me, just a waste of money for them, because these are people who have come here with very little or nothing and they have come to give their families a better life. They care about this so much and their values are not in conflict with our society. Their values and their languages – this language is one of the oldest languages that has survived to this day, potentially even the oldest language around. It is certainly one of the oldest, and it is incredibly important to them that they can pass on what they have brought and survived with. I think that given that they no longer have a nation that they can actually put their flag in and say, ‘This is my country, my home,’ they have come here with that intent: ‘This is my country, and this is my home.’ And their request is simple. New South Wales has been able to grant them a school. The New South Wales government has been able to give them space – why not Victoria? Promises, promises, promises but no delivery. All this talk about ‘Let’s bash the opposition’ – we have been in opposition for 10 years. We cannot deliver the school for them, but if we could, I can guarantee we would fight tooth and nail to make sure that this community could have their faith, their values, their language and their school, because they deserve it, because we believe in that freedom and because we believe in the opportunity for people in Australia to be able to embrace the democratic system and the freedoms that democracy actually provides.

So in conclusion all I can say is that when you have this many people prepared to come out through peak-hour traffic because they care that much about what happens to their community and their school and about the opportunity to have that school and to raise their kids in a school that means something to them – I think that this government needs to listen to that.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (18:01): I rise to make a very brief contribution in relation to this petition and echo those commitments and comments that my colleague Minister Erdogan has made this afternoon.

We are a proudly multicultural community here in Victoria. We have so many different parts of our community that have come from all over the world to make a better life in Victoria, and our government will always stand by our multicultural and diverse communities. It is one of our state’s great strengths, and we are obviously very keen to ensure that we work closely with the community when it comes to not only community infrastructure, people’s right to practise their faith and their right to come together and celebrate their culture but also obviously other important institutions such as schools and churches and places of faith. So as my colleague has already indicated, the government will continue to work with the community in making sure that they achieve their desired outcome when it comes to having their own school. As you know, there are matters afoot currently before VCAT, but rest assured the government will continue to work closely with the community.

We understand that this is an important issue for many, many families right across the northern suburbs, and we will work closely with the community to realise this vision, and I think that it is very important that we do not play politics with this issue, because our social cohesion and our strength as a vibrant and multicultural community is too important for that.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (18:03): I would like to thank those that made contributions in good faith, particularly Mr Welch and Mrs Hermans as well. I would just like to, in my summing-up, acknowledge a couple of comments, particularly comments that I was attempting to stoke division or being deceptive. I would not be assisting with this school if there had not been a request and pleading with me by the reverend fathers, the bishop and the church community to work

with them. Where they were working with the government, that was okay. Where they need assistance, of course I will provide assistance as the local member, and that is what I will do.

It is important that the Minister for Multicultural Affairs keep this above politics. On 5 August the Leader of the Opposition John Pesutto wrote to Jacinta Allan about the school's plight before it was in VCAT and asked her to join with him in supporting the school to keep it above politics. She still has not responded. My colleague Jess Wilson, the Shadow Minister for Early Childhood and Education, has written to the Minister for Education Ben Carroll. At least he had the decency to respond, saying he could not really comment because it was in VCAT but in principle wanted to work with the community to support the school.

Something I want to particularly talk about is that Mr Erdogan mentioned the member for Kalkallo lobbying as well. According to what I have heard, she has been completely absent on this issue and abdicated her responsibilities as a local member to other members of Parliament that are not in cabinet. The most influential person in this case would be the member for Kalkallo, who sits across the cabinet table from the Minister for Planning, who does have the ability to call this in, who does call in other projects in Liberal seats.

It is important to support this school. I will be with the school every step of the way in support of it.

Motion agreed to.

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (18:05): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Teacher workforce

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:06): (1274) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Education, and it is good to follow on from our previous debate. The issue that I raise is one that affects all of our Victorian children and the prosperity of our state, and that is the alarming decline in mathematics outcomes in Victoria. Recent statistics reveal a troubling trend. According to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, the PISA, Victorian students have seen a significant drop in mathematical proficiency over the last two decades. I am old enough to have completed what we used to call, back before the Boer War, pure and applied, but nowadays we call it math methods and specialist methods – not only a very worthwhile academic pursuit but a pursuit for prosperity and creation of jobs and career opportunities. Australia was ranked, in 2002, 11th globally, and now we have fallen to 29th place out of 38 countries. In Victoria this decline is particularly concerning as nearly half of our 15-year-olds are failing to meet national standards of proficiency.

It cannot be overstated: mathematics is not just a subject, it is a critical skill that underpins many aspects of modern life and is essential for a wide range of career opportunities, from engineering to technology, from finance to health care. Proficiency in maths opens the door to high-paying and high-demand jobs. Strong skills are skills for life and foster innovation and competition in our state.

The decline in mathematics outcomes has far-reaching implications. It limits our students' career opportunities and hampers our state's ability to attract and retain industries that rely on a skilled workforce, and we saw that with leading academics having this same conversation. This must be reversed, and the education minister must put heart and soul into this focus. We certainly saw in the education inquiry the importance, the need and requirement to put a greater focus on and target for government of, not only in mathematics, which is the topic of my interest tonight, but also in literacy, long-term and short-term goals. That was also universally adopted and accepted by the Grattan Institute think tank.

What I am calling on the minister to do is to take action to address this decline in standards. It includes investing in teacher training to ensure that educators are equipped with the best techniques, incorporating technology and innovation in our teaching to provide that mentorship for teachers, provide that support for our students and provide the ability to further our mathematical skills.

Miss Lacey Cafe and Wine Bar

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:09): (1275) My adjournment matter this evening is directed to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure in the other place. The action I seek is for the minister to provide clarity on the issue of fencing outside the Miss Lacey Cafe and Wine Bar in Croydon. It is important that the full picture is shared with the community as there appears to have been some misunderstanding around the source of the recent changes affecting the outdoor dining space. Miss Lacey Cafe and Wine Bar is a valued destination in the North-Eastern Metropolitan region, drawing both locals and visitors to enjoy its offerings. However, it has come to my attention that recent comments in the other place misrepresented the situation, suggesting that the Level Crossing Removal Project work had interfered with the cafe's fencing. In reality the Maroondah City Council have confirmed that they do not want the permanent fencing which was previously situated outside the cafe, indicating that the cafe would need to discuss any such plans for fencing directly with the council. The Level Crossing Removal Authority's design team are working with the local council, the Croydon Main Street Traders Association and the Miss Lacey Cafe and Wine Bar to understand whether any changes can be made to the outdoor dining area, including the possibility of movable fencing. The Level Crossing Removal Authority are working closely with the Miss Lacey Cafe and Wine Bar and other local businesses to support them while they work on removing the dangerous level crossing and roundabout at Coolstore Road, Croydon.

Given this context, I ask the Minister for Transport Infrastructure to clarify these details on the record so that the community can have a clear understanding of the issue, including Maroondah City Council's role in the decision and the efforts of the Level Crossing Removal Authority to support a viable outcome. It is disappointing that the member for Croydon contorted the facts on this matter, and I hope that moving forward we can collectively work towards a solution that serves both the cafe and the community.

Patient transport

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (18:11): (1276) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Health. The action I seek is for the minister to reinstate claims for taxi fares for the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme. Since 2013 the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme has been helping regional Victorians cover the costs of travelling to the city to receive vital treatment for cancer and other diseases. From train and taxi fares to accommodation, the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme helps ease the burden on patients who, through no fault of their own, must travel great distances for treatment. My constituents have reached out in dismay at the knowledge that taxi transfers from Southern Cross station are no longer covered by the VPTAS as there is public transport available. Since September of this year patients have been expected to travel on public transport to get to and from their medical appointments. I am not sure if the minister has ever tried to travel on trams, buses or trains when she is unwell, but this can be a harrowing, difficult and dangerous journey for the elderly and those undergoing treatments. Those in wheelchairs or who need the aid of walkers or walking sticks find it very difficult to use public transport. The public transport system can be difficult for the elderly to understand, not to mention that after treatment most patients are tired, in pain, nauseous and generally feeling unwell. Forcing these patients to travel on public transport is cruel. Minister, reinstate the capacity for rural patients to claim their taxi fares through the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme.

Melbourne Airport

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:12): (1277) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events. Recently I had the great pleasure of re-entering the great state of Victoria, except to say it was not a great pleasure.

Harriet Shing interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: I know, Minister Shing, it is quite disappointing to hear that. I will tell you what: if you have ever been through customs at Melbourne Airport, you know it is like – I would say Third World, but in actual fact I have visited a lot of the Third World and it is positively first rate compared to Melbourne Airport. Melbourne Airport is without question quite possibly one of the worst, most ugly dog's breakfasts of an operation. It used to be a beautiful airport that used to combine domestic and international.

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: Forget the rail connection; I am not the slightest bit interested, personally, because they have messed it up so badly. I mean, you are going into a dungeon of an airport, so if you are international and it is your first introduction to Melbourne, it is shocking. You get off that plane, you take one look, you turn back around and say, 'Listen, do you mind if I just sit here while they clean and I'll go right back out of here.' It is an embarrassment. Making matters worse, under the federal government now, customs was just a debacle. You had people and systems not working. There are not enough scanners for the passports. There were kids separated from their parents – the kids were on one side of the aisle while the parents were on the other side.

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: This is the federal government's fault, Minister. I am glad you asked. I am very glad you asked. This is the Albanese government's fault. They are horrendous. They are terrible. We know that. We will discuss that later. I am happy to take time and even have a cup of tea with you and talk about this. But my central point here is that for every person who comes to our beautiful state, their entry to Victoria is a squalor of an airport which over the years has deteriorated to such an extent. It once had pride of place in this state, but that is long gone. It is a like a box-style DFO. That is the best thing I can say about it really. It is a DFO, except it does not come with DFO prices. I do not know who is shopping at Armani and Gucci, but it is certainly not me, I can tell you. I am exiting or entering.

Members interjecting.

Nick McGOWAN: You could never tell by the way I dress; I know, Minister. I am dressed quite fine. I have even got a jacket on today, but that is because I have such respect for the international visitors who come to our state. Unlike the government of Victoria, who clearly do not care what the impression is when people come to this state, I do.

I am asking the minister dearly, Minister Dimopoulos, please, you understand what it is like for people to come from far afield. If this is the first time they see the great state of Victoria, it is very embarrassing. Please, even just put up a poster. I will put up a poster. I will tell you what, Minister: if you like, I will pay for the poster and I will put it up myself. I will try and avoid the people who work there, because I have not been too kind to them tonight. Apologies to them. I know it is not their individual responsibility. But in addition to the customs facility, in addition to the ambience, in addition to the low ceilings, the dark hallways and the absolute shambles – I would use a swearword, but I am not going to do that – that is customs, with the green lane and the red lane, for the love of God, Minister, please would you sort out Melbourne Airport? It is an international embarrassment to us all. We deserve a truly beautiful airport. We are far from that.

The PRESIDENT: I think that it is on the record, but it is definitely a federal issue, so just leave it out, I think, Mr McGowan. He has got it on the record anyway.

Residential planning zones

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:16): (1278) My adjournment tonight is for the Minister for Planning, and it concerns the state government's high-density, high-rise zones – the 10 zones, three of which are in my electorate – and the 25 high-density, high-rise zones that are to be put around railway stations and the like. What I would ask is for the minister to meet formally with each council that is involved – all of them in Southern Metro, but beyond that, in each of the areas the minister should meet with them formally. I ask her to commit to that and to publicly state that she will do that.

Sitting suspended 6:17 pm until 6:27 pm.

Hemp industry

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:27): (1279) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Planning. Earlier this year Legalise Cannabis Victoria tabled a bill calling for a standalone hemp act in Victoria. We were happy to see that following this the government responded to the inquiry into the industrial hemp industry in Victoria and supported almost all of its recommendations. In their response they acknowledged the need to develop the hemp industry in Victoria, the barriers that exist in the planning system and an openness to reform.

In the months since we have continued to hear from hemp growers about their difficulties with getting their projects off the ground. This can come in many forms, but often it occurs at the planning level when neighbours and others object to an application, forcing it through an appeals process. In some instances this is undeniably a kind of lawfare: that is, the use of the legal system to damage hemp growers and stifle the hemp industry. In one such example in my region a person is seeking to process industrial hemp grown on their farm to make a sustainable hemp-based version of a mud brick to sell to the building industry. Despite council support for their plans and the well-understood importance of these kinds of efficient and sustainable building materials, their plans have been stopped in their tracks. A victim of lawfare against the hemp industry, their project has been the subject of numerous objections from their neighbours, who have now appealed to VCAT. This series of objections has blown out the expected timeline for their project. They now estimate these objections will cause an 18-month delay.

People in the agricultural sector and those wanting to get into hemp inadvertently hear about all of these kinds of delays and decide that hemp is all too hard. Despite this government's commitment to better supporting the hemp industry of Victoria, I remain concerned that this kind of lawfare will only grow unless the government protects growers and works to dismantle the stigma surrounding hemp. I ask: will the minister help ensure that hemp growers are not unfairly subject to this kind of lawfare?

Wonthaggi planning

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:30): (1280) My adjournment is for the Minister for Planning, and the action that I seek is for the minister to put aside whatever her personal dislike of the member for Bass is and stop penalising the people of Bass with this rolling campaign of attacks on their rights. Last summer, while most of us were enjoying Christmas, watching the cricket or having some family time, the Minister for Planning quietly placed a retrospective environmental audit overlay across a lot of Wonthaggi North. Residents and homeowners found out by accident, and the overlay was only removed due to an incredible push and efforts from locals. The whole scenario was completely unnecessary and revealed just how ineffective the member for Bass is.

Now we have another example of the Minister for Planning seeking to decimate another town within the electorate of Bass, and again locals are telling me that the member for Bass has been either unwilling or unable to assist. Labor's proposed strategic extractive resource areas – or SERA – planning controls will remove the rights of residents in Lang Lang to be informed of, object to or

appeal against new or expanded quarries in the area. The people of Lang Lang are not anti quarry and they are not anti jobs. They simply seek a reasonable and sensible balance between their rights and potential expansions. These locals also think that it is reasonable to consider all of the impacts of the new and extended quarries on the town without pretending that the planning proposal can be considered in isolation.

The Lang Lang bypass has been promised for years and has been a significant component of any plan to expand the quarries to allow extra truck traffic. However, under this government people are not even allowed to raise the bypass as part of their submission against these proposals. Locals were told by the Department of Transport and Planning at an information session that if they bring up an issue that is beyond the planning reforms in the submission it will not be reviewed by the department of planning. One local told me that they are only asking for submissions about the proposed legislation and nothing else, but they could also be asking for submissions about the other interlinked issues as well, such as the bypass, air quality testing et cetera. This government is not interested in hearing from the people that are affected by this. They only care about the decisions made within the Spring Street bubble and 1 Treasury Place.

Nothing better sums up the priorities of this government than a quote by the member for Bass that a member of the public told me. She told people that she would try to help even though they do not vote for her. That is really all they care about – not your rights, only votes.

The PRESIDENT: Can I check, was that action for a minister to stop being mean to a member of Parliament?

Renee HEATH: To stop her rolling campaign.

The PRESIDENT: Sorry, can I just hear the action again?

Renee HEATH: Yes, sure. My adjournment is for the Minister for Planning, and the action that I seek is for the minister to put aside whatever dislike she has for the member for Bass and – this is the action – to stop penalising the people of Bass with a rolling campaign of attacks on their rights.

The PRESIDENT: I will just review it tomorrow. I heard the first bit and I thought that was a weird action.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region schools

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:34): (1281) My adjournment matter is for the Deputy Premier in his role as Minister for Education, and the action that I am seeking is for the minister to provide an update on how round 2 of the Building Fund for Non-Government Schools is supporting some non-government schools across Victoria. The Allan Labor government is supporting funding that helps schools build new campuses and upgrade and expand their existing spaces. This will help school communities to deliver better learning outcomes for their students. The fund is helping a great school in my electorate, Hillcrest Christian College, to build a multisports gymnasium for its senior precinct. It will include three courts, storage and car parking spaces. Melbourne's south-east, an area I am very proud to represent, is growing rapidly, with some areas such as Clyde North growing at an estimated 50 per cent growth rate since the last census results alone.

These investments will ensure that schools in this area are able to keep up with population growth, and it does come on top of the previous announcement made for Clyde Grammar in the area as well. The children of this state are the future of this state, and this is a government that is investing heavily in schools that will equip the next generation of Victorians with the best opportunities possible to learn the skills needed to grow into productive members of our community. Indeed my electorate has been the beneficiary of many other government investments in our future Victorians, with countless kinders, new public primary schools and new public secondary schools and, as we are here to discuss today, support for non-government schools, which are an important part of our school network as well.

With the demand for sport in the area being particularly strong and indeed with the demand for basketball at an unprecedented rate in the City of Casey – I am sure it is quite soon to take over as the heart of our nation’s community sport, basketball, a title we look forward to snatching off those in other parts of the east – it is very exciting to see what these three courts will also mean for local community associations, including the Casey Basketball Association, who will also be able to benefit from this significant investment. So the action that I am seeking from the minister is an update on how the Building Fund for Non-Government Schools is supporting non-government schools in my electorate.

Supermarket prices

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:36): (1282) My adjournment matter is for the Premier, and the action that I seek is that the Labor government urgently intervene in the profiteering practices of major supermarkets that are driving Australian families deeper into debt. In today’s economy countless Victorians are drowning in debt, struggling to make ends meet while supermarkets exploit their wallets and their mental health. The cycle of debt is not just a financial issue, it is a human crisis that tears families apart and devastates our communities. This is unacceptable, and it is the government’s responsibility to take a stand and address this.

As Rachna Madaan Bowman, a dedicated financial counsellor from South East Community Links, powerfully stated during the recent inquiry into food security in Victoria:

A lot of people coming to our service have not eaten for days, and if you have not eaten for days and you are sleeping in your car, you are quite heightened and you are quite distressed, and if we turn them away and say, ‘We can’t actually afford to give you food,’ that escalates the situation ...

Turning someone away at that time when they are at their lowest is like you are kicking them in their guts again and telling them sorry ... It is like a downward spiral.

Rachna’s words highlight the urgent need for comprehensive support systems that help Victorians navigate financial hardships without experiencing the exploitative practices of supermarkets. With their duopolistic control and pricing strategies, supermarkets are exacerbating the cost-of-living crisis by making essential goods unaffordable for many families. This increases financial stress and limits access to nutritious food, pushing our most vulnerable communities further into desperation.

A recent Essential poll shows that 70 per cent of Australians support price caps on rent, on groceries and on energy bills. The government must act now to regulate supermarket pricing and ensure fair practices that do not trap families in unmanageable debt. Additionally, significant investment needs to be made in financial counselling services to provide the necessary support for those already struggling. The Greens have consistently called for the Labor government to prioritise the financial wellbeing of all Victorians. It is time to put people over profits and ensure that every family has the support they need to thrive without the fear of falling into debt. The Greens will support you; you just need the guts to do it.

The PRESIDENT: I might review that one too, Mr Puglielli. I am not undermining the seriousness of your concern. I just do not know if the supermarkets ever fall into the state government’s remit, so I will have a look at that one.

Artificial intelligence

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:39): (1283) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Jobs and Industry. The National Tech Summit was held in Melbourne this week. It was a very important tech conference attended by some very serious players in the tech industry, and it is reported that in what became an instantly infamous keynote speech the Labor Parliamentary Secretary for Jobs made repeated references to ‘AI technology’ – how AI was sweeping changes in society, how AI was transforming the economy, how AI would underpin the future. Of course ‘AI’ was actually meant to be ‘AI’, artificial intelligence. That a government member, the Parliamentary Secretary for Jobs, can address a tech conference without knowing what AI is has left everybody

speechless. One of the greatest challenges governments across the world face is how to successfully integrate AI into our world without stifling it, while preventing its excesses. The businesses at this tech conference gathered precisely because they know the country needs to grasp these opportunities, and they do this by sharing insights, experiences and perspectives. What the Labor government's faux pas really demonstrates is that this government is not capable or qualified to be sitting at the table, and that is what is really, truly humiliating.

As an entrepreneur with AI patents in my name, whose business brought AI to market, I can tell you that the biggest obstacle businesses will often face is whether the government understands and creates an environment in which the technology can succeed or simply does not get it and gets in the way. How can a government foster and regulate this critical technology if it does not even know what it is? I would also say that if you were in a private sector business investing capital in this space and someone representing your company walked into a public event, putting your firm's reputation on the line, and spoke so ignorantly as the Labor government did at this forum, they would be sacked before they got back to the office that afternoon.

I believe, above all, that history is driven by economics and the decisions we make today matter. Economics means, really, jobs, families supporting themselves and having good schools, hospitals and roads. Economics means sovereign capability and national self-sufficiency. AI is a wave heading towards us that will completely transform the economics of production, service provision, finance, law, education, employment and prosperity. This government's incompetence means we are not participating in that wave, and if we are not participating in that wave, we will be hit by it.

The action I seek from the minister is to explain how it is possible that a member of the government can attend a technology conference and not know what AI is, let alone understand its connection to industry and innovation, and to please advise what steps the government will take to address the damage to Victoria's tech investment reputation.

The PRESIDENT: I am struggling with that, if that comes under that minister's remit as well. We will look at it.

Fines system

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (18:42): (1284) My adjournment this evening is to the Attorney-General, and the action I seek is for her to overhaul the Victorian fines system to limit the disproportionate impact penalties have on people on low incomes or who are experiencing poverty. There have been calls for years for Victoria to implement a fairer fines system. As we find ourselves now in a longer and deeper cost-of-living crisis, these calls become more acute. People on low incomes have to choose between paying their fines and paying rent or buying medicine. The system is unnecessarily sending people to jail, adding enormous costs to the court system and corrections, and it is derailing people's lives. In fact fines are the most widely applied criminal sanction, dwarfing the number of court hearings for more serious criminal offences determined each year, and shockingly, community legal centres report that unpaid fines are among the top five issues that clients are seeking help with.

Victoria has a flat rate system, so a speeding fine which might be a crippling financial burden for someone who is poor might be a mere annoyance for someone on a higher income. These fines are designed to be a deterrent and to promote safer driving, objectives that we all can agree with, but they are not functioning as a deterrent for the wealthy, who can easily afford them and may think little of them. Victoria has one of the world's harshest fines systems for public transport infringements. Victorians travelling without a valid Myki or concession card are whacked with an enormous \$296 fine, whereas in comparison in WA the same kind of offence is just \$100, in London it is \$96 and in Singapore it is just \$55. New South Wales fare evasion fines are \$200 and reduced to \$100 for people on Centrelink payments. Toll road offences, which generally do not pose a significant community risk to safety, are allowed to spiral into debts of tens of thousands of dollars, which are easily accrued if you have moved address, do not get the notices or are in financial hardship to begin with.

The Australia Institute released a report last month titled *Refining Fines: Addressing the Inequality of Traffic Penalties in Australia* calling for a proportional system where there is a sliding scale of fines based on a person's income. My colleague Dr Tim Read sought and published a research paper in 2022 advocating a similar day-fine approach to that used in Finland, Switzerland and other jurisdictions, and even New South Wales has recently implemented fines reform to help people who are already under financial strain. It is high time that Victoria did the same.

Donnybrook Road, Kalkallo

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:45): (1285) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and the action that I seek is for the minister to prioritise the safety of Donnybrook and Kalkallo residents by urgently duplicating Donnybrook Road on the eastern side of the Hume Freeway and also exploring and planning alternative entrance and exit routes for all estates on Donnybrook Road. Donnybrook Road east of the Hume Freeway on Melbourne's northern fringe is typical of the failure of this Labor government to adequately plan for the needs of residents in new housing developments. The eastern side of Donnybrook Road stands in stark contrast to the western side of the freeway in Merrifield. West of the freeway the road is a magnificent four-lane road separated by a wide median strip. Of course this is an area that was planned and developed by the Liberal planning minister Matthew Guy. But on the eastern side, in an area planned and developed by Labor, the road is still a single-lane country road struggling to cope with the growing demand created by new housing developments in the City of Hume and the City of Whittlesea. To add to the problem, the flyover bridge over the freeway is also single lane and is causing significant problems as traffic trying to exit the freeway to travel east on Donnybrook Road is backed up for hundreds of metres and at times onto the freeway itself.

One of the greatest failures in planning is that all of these new estates along the eastern side of the freeway only have one entry and exit point, and that is via Donnybrook Road. Last week two trucks collided on Donnybrook Road by Serrata Avenue. Because Donnybrook road is only a single lane, the whole road was closed for hours and residents of the housing estates were unable to return to their homes. One of my constituents contacted me afterwards with a heartbreaking message. Because of the truck crash and road closure she was stuck at the Epping Road roundabout with her toddler, unable to get home and breastfeed her baby, who was screaming at home. She then had to go to hospital with her toddler, who had become dehydrated after being stuck in a hot car for hours. This is just one example of the chaos caused by Labor's complete mismanagement of suburban expansion in the northern growth areas. The lack of footpaths and narrow single-lane road means that it is unsafe for pedestrians and cyclists.

Currently the eastern side of Donnybrook Road services the Cloverton estate in the City of Hume and six estates in the City of Whittlesea, all with only the one entry and exit point, which is Donnybrook Road. Cloverton in the City of Hume currently has around 3150 dwellings and 10,000 residents but is expected to almost double to over 18,000 residents. In the City of Whittlesea six housing estates currently have around 3740 completed homes, but that is less than a quarter of the projected 15,701 homes planned to be developed in 17 estates on this section of Donnybrook Road, which are expected to house over 45,000 residents. The additional homes and residents will place additional pressure on a road that is already failing to meet the needs of existing residents. The Allan Labor government has abandoned these people, happy to collect taxes from them but not willing to put in the basic road and transport infrastructure they desperately need.

Animal welfare

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:48): (1286) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Agriculture, and the action that I seek is for her to explain why 3.65 million chickens were used for a single research project in 2022. In the last reporting period Animal Welfare Victoria claimed that over 5 million animals were used for scientific research, teaching and testing. That is an increase in animal use of 196 per cent compared to the previous year. The increase is attributed to a single

project in which chickens were sought from a commercial supplier to be used for regulatory product testing for the purposes of improving animal management and production, but no other information is provided except for the fact that 51 14 of them were killed in that year.

The report also tells us that when they were no longer deemed useful for scientific experiments labs across Victoria killed 40 primates, 384,942 mice, 22 exotic birds, 139 native birds – 12 of which were taken from the wild – 27 domestic cats, four koalas and 145 macropods. Thousands of animals are killed, but the true overall number is rather unclear. The report celebrates a low per-year euthanasia rate, but animals are not necessarily killed in the same year they are experimented on. Many will spend years involved in further testing, and the reality is that most animals will die rather than being rehomed. This is especially the case for native wild animals.

The report has a category ‘Death as an end point’ and another for ‘Animal unconscious without recovery’. I am no expert, but that sounds a whole lot like death to me. In two of the vaguest categories from the report, labs also experimented on and killed eight non-specified laboratory mammals and 10 native animals in a category called ‘Other’.

Freedom-of-information requests obtained by Animal-Free Science Advocacy in 2022 revealed images of primates confined in a breeding facility in Churchill, near Gippsland. The images were the first look into the suffering of animals in wire cages as they are tested on and bred repeatedly for upwards of 23 years. These are the details left out of Animal Welfare Victoria’s report.

The public deserves to know what is going on in labs. They deserve to know what kinds of animals are being tested on for their perceived benefit, and they deserve to know where those animals end up if they are not killed in the end. I hope the minister will start the process of greater transparency by first clarifying how and why a project involving nearly 4 million chickens took place in 2022.

Housing

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:52): (1287) My adjournment debate tonight is for the Premier and concerns her government’s ‘More homes, more opportunities’ slogan, which recently saw more than a week of carefully choreographed housing announcements. Now, we all know we need more housing and we need it quickly. The plans envisage 2 million homes in the next two decades. In the time it took for the Premier to make her announcements, Victoria’s population grew by 3000, yet the number of houses completed, averaged out, was only 1000. We are the fastest growing state in raw terms, yet we are shooting ourselves in the foot on housing. Just when houses should be getting built quicker, things are slowing down.

I was particularly taken by an analysis released last week by Master Builders Australia. The title says it all: ‘It shouldn’t take this long to build a home’. The facts are simple: 15 years ago building a detached house in Victoria typically took about nine months. Today, however, that timeframe has extended to an average of 12.7 months, more than 40 per cent longer. Building apartments has slowed down even more. Fifteen years ago it took 18.5 months from approval to completion. Now it is more than 33 months, a staggering 80 per cent increase. Surely things should be getting quicker. Technological advancements, better equipment, newer processes – they should all be driving productivity and reducing construction time, yet we see the exact opposite to an extraordinary degree.

Of course I was well aware of the cost government adds to building housing. Indeed I have raised it here many times. The latest Housing Industry Association report confirms it remains as bad as ever, highlighting that 37 per cent of the cost of a house and land package in Melbourne is attributable to government. And there are new costs too – a windfall tax of up to 62.5 per cent, a land tax surcharge for Victorians with more than one home and inflated costs associated with ongoing changes to the National Construction Code.

Cultural heritage laws have created a building permit with ‘no limit on timing or cost’. As developer Max Shifman said in the *Age*:

... we need to be able to have honest conversations about planning regulations which aren't working well, without being called racist.

The action I seek from the Premier is a statement recognising all of this. Unlike an announcement costing taxpayers money, this would be free. I ask her to announce a review of these processes from the ground up, to speed up and make more viable the house building we so desperately need.

The PRESIDENT: The action for that one is the review of the processes rather than a statement?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes.

Police resources

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:55): (1288) My adjournment is to the Minister for Police, and the action I seek is for the minister to take immediate action in addressing the lack of adequate police numbers in this state by allowing ex-police officers to be re-employed. This will relieve junior members to perform the operational tasks that some may be struggling to meet. Today I and other Liberal-National members of Parliament gave notice of motions in Parliament condemning the Premier for failing to reach a pay deal with police at a time when crimes against the person in this state are up. In my electorate alone, in Carrum Downs crimes against the person increased 20 per cent in 12 months. In Cranbourne burglaries increased 700 per cent in 12 months. In Frankston South burglaries increased 82 per cent in 12 months. In Mordialloc theft of a motor vehicle increased by 48 per cent in 12 months. In Narre Warren South burglaries increased by 77 per cent in 12 months. These are just figures for 12 months, and it is estimated that there are more than a thousand police vacancies statewide. We also know that there are nearly 800 – approximately 747 – police officers on sick leave or covered by WorkCover, and 612 officers are out on mental health issues.

The recent reports about the significant increases in police retirements during July and August of this year raise serious concerns about the adequacy of Victoria's police staffing levels. While the police force acknowledges the annual fluctuation in retirements, this year's figures are exceptionally high, potentially making the situation a lot worse. The government's response to this issue is poor – in fact very poor. In fact I would go on to say it is absolutely appalling and dreadful. While hiring additional professionals to help address the backlog of police applicants will assist, it will not provide immediate relief to the current staffing shortages.

The community cannot afford to wait another 12 months for a solution. The minister needs to provide a clear explanation to the community about how these staffing shortages are impacting service delivery and public safety. Victims of crime deserve to know why their calls for help are not answered promptly and why investigations may be delayed. It is really important that we look at the vacancies that currently exist, because we have people that have been unable to work because they have not been vaccinated – we know that they were stood down – and we need many people to come back into the police force regardless of things that have taken place in the past.

As has been said by Kel Glare, there are literally thousands of former police officers who, with little training, could augment the force staffing demands to flatten out the peaks and troughs, and they are not old. Substantial numbers left their police careers to raise families or for other personal reasons, and those circumstances may have changed.

The PRESIDENT: Before I call the minister, I will indicate that Mr McGowan's adjournment does not need to be addressed because it was not under state administration. And could you park Dr Heath's, Mr Welch's and Mr Puglielli's – park those; you do not need to address them, because I am going to review them to see if that is a similar thing as far as state administration goes.

Responses

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (18:58): Given the comments that you have just made, President, those matters that remain as adjournment matters this evening will be referred to the relevant ministers for response.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned at 7:58 pm.

*Joint sitting of Parliament***Legislative Council vacancy****Members of both houses met in Assembly chamber at 6:22 pm.**

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

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

That the Honourable Maree Edwards, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, be appointed Chair of this joint sitting.

She is willing to accept the nomination, I am advised.

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

The Clerk: Are there any other proposals? There being no other proposal, the Honourable Maree Edwards, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, will take the chair for this joint sitting.

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

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

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

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

Motion agreed to.

The CHAIR: The rules have been adopted. I remind everyone, including visitors in the gallery, that photos and applause are not allowed. I now invite proposals from members for a person to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council.

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

That Anasina Gray-Barberio be chosen to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council.

She is willing to accept the nomination. In order to satisfy the joint sitting as to the requirements of section 27A(4) of the Constitution Act 1975, I also advise that the Speaker has advice from the Australian Greens Victoria's registered officer that Anasina Gray-Barberio is the selection of the Australian Greens Victoria, the party previously represented in the Legislative Council by Samantha Ratnam.

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

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

That Anasina Gray-Barberio be chosen to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council.

Question agreed to.

The CHAIR: I declare that Anasina Gray-Barberio has been chosen to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council. I will advise the Governor accordingly.

I now declare the joint sitting closed.

Proceedings terminated 6:25 pm.