

2014 SCHOOLS STATE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

Australia is in a 'budget crisis' and all Australians must share the burden — directly or indirectly

Legislative Assembly Chamber

Parliament House

Melbourne

20 October 2014

Participants

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|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Emerson Cross | Ballarat Clarendon College |
| Sparsh Ahuja | Balwyn High School |
| Peng He | Brunswick Secondary College |
| Wen Xiang Mao | Brunswick Secondary College |
| Sophie van Dartel | Brunswick Secondary College |
| Farouk Al-Salihi | Camberwell Grammar School |
| Isaac Choong | Camberwell Grammar School |
| Jasper MacCuspie | Camberwell Grammar School |
| Ashleigh Cumming | Forest Hill College |
| Connie Fan | Forest Hill College |
| John Yang | Forest Hill College |
| Zena Zeng | Forest Hill College |
| Jason Zhu | Forest Hill College |
| Zakiya Gora-Ivanoff | Frankston High School |
| Danai Harawa | Frankston High School |
| Amy Moody | Frankston High School |
| Angus Simmie | Frankston High School |
| Georgia Smollen | Frankston High School |
| Claudia Chandra | Geelong Grammar School |
| Lauren Lambrineas | Genazzano FCJ College |
| Rachael Kay | Genazzano FCJ College |
| Samantha Pereira | Genazzano FCJ College |
| Lorena Stents | Genazzano FCJ College |
| Eliza Straford | Genazzano FCJ College |
| Georgia Ashley | Glen Waverley Secondary College |
| Taylah Stretton | Glen Waverley Secondary College |
| Kaarthika Thirugnanasundralingam | Glen Waverley Secondary College |
| Lucas Muehleisen | John Monash Science School |
| Robert Dixon | John Paul College |
| Domenic Zattra | John Paul College |
| Michael Xing | Haileybury |
| Alice Curtis | Kingswood College |
| Simone Scandrett | Kingswood College |
| Callum Shemmell | Kingswood College |
| Haomin Chen | Koonung Secondary College |
| Jenny Ji | Koonung Secondary College |
| Zhenglin Jia | Koonung Secondary College |
| Sijie Tan | Koonung Secondary College |
| Simin Tan | Koonung Secondary College |
| Li Zhaoyu | Koonung Secondary College |
| Mouhamed Assaad | Lalor Secondary College |
| Nhi Chanh | Lalor Secondary College |
| Nancy Ghanem | Lalor Secondary College |
| Lirim Mustafovski | Lalor Secondary College |
| Julia Pavia | Lalor Secondary College |
| Kenny Tran | Lalor Secondary college |
| Faith Tuitea | Lalor Secondary College |
| Hana Youssef | Lalor Secondary College |
| Narzira Zeghaib | Lalor Secondary College |
| Sarah Daw | MacKillop College Werribee |
| Kirsty Fealy | MacKillop College Werribee |
| Royston Fernandes | MacKillop College Werribee |
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Angela Cheng
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Elizabeth Bolt
Meg Janssen
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Samuel Charville
Isobel Revere
Chloe Shanahan
Savannah Straatman
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Margaret Tran
William Bainbridge
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McKinnon Secondary College
McKinnon Secondary College
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Mount Clear College
Mount Eliza Secondary College
Mount Eliza Secondary College
Mount Eliza Secondary College
Mount Waverley Secondary College
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Northcote High School
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Northcote High School
Our Lady of Sion College
Reservoir High School
Ringwood Secondary College
Ringwood Secondary College
Ringwood Secondary College
Ringwood Secondary College
Scotch College Melbourne
Scotch College Melbourne
Scotch College Melbourne
Scotch College Melbourne
St Catherine's School
St Catherine's School
St Catherine's School
Sunbury College
Sunbury College
Sunbury College
Sunbury College
The Mac.Robertson Girls High School
The Mac.Robertson Girls High School
The Mac.Robertson Girls High School
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The University High School
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The University High School
The University High School
The University High School
Thornbury High School
Wodonga Senior Secondary College

WELCOME TO COUNTRY

Didgeridoo played.

Mr BRIGGS — Yearmenn koondée-bik Wurundjeri-Ballak. Wominjeka, wominjeka.

This is the land of the Wurundjeri people. Welcome, welcome. My name is Graham Briggs. I am very pleased to be invited today to provide a welcome to country. One of the key things within our traditions and our cultures that has been in existence here in this land on which Parliament is situated is a welcome, a tanderum, which is a gathering of gifts and clans. So in coming here today and being part of the assembly here in this great room, you are actually representing your clan, your area, your school. I would like to welcome you here.

I am fourth generation Wurundjeri. My great-great-great-grandmother's name was Borat, or Annie, and she was sister to the great William Barak, down by the Birrarung, which was the name that we gave the Yarra. Birrarung, the Yarra, means 'white'. So obviously there is confusion there, because the Yarra is not white.

One of the key things I would like to partake of is an exploration of 'gift'. One of the gifts you tend to do in a tanderum — which is that gathering I just mentioned — is provide something to the visitors — which is, a didgeridoo.

Didgeridoo played.

Mr BRIGGS — One of the key things within our culture is learning. I was privileged to go to a place called Worawa Aboriginal College where I was granted my year 12 VCE, and just recently my eldest child who is 17 completed her VCE. One of the key things that my grandmother taught me and my eight or nine siblings was to take on the language of non-Aboriginal people to be able to succeed in the land which we now call Australia and the land which we now call Victoria.

One of the key things I would like to pass on to you today, which is part of the debate, is in regard to budgeting. Over the next five years there will be large cuts made to the Aboriginal budget. One of the key things that not only impacts on the remote Aboriginal people but also on urban Aboriginal people is around health, which is really important. I suffer from high blood pressure, which I was diagnosed with at the age of 31.

Today I am heading off to a place called Cummeragunja, which is up along the Murray River. Up along the Murray River is where the great William Cooper came from. You may or may not know about him, but try to understand the great things that William Cooper did back in the 1950s. He wrote a petition and marched to provide support for the Jewish Holocaust victims. More recently, about three or four years ago, there was a re-enactment of the day when my great-great-grandfather William Cooper went across from Footscray and marched all the way to the steps of the then German consulate. Today I am heading up to Cummeragunja where we will bury my cousin, who was aged 45.

One of the key things you will be debating today is understanding the ripple effects of decisions that people do not tend to understand on the ground and the impacts they will have on smaller Aboriginal health services. Look into the budget today, find out and understand what you are debating and do it in good faith. On behalf of my people, the Wurrung, and within my language I say: Wominjeka. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

The CHAIR — Thank you Graham for that welcome to country, and thank you so much for coming here today when you obviously have a trying time ahead of you going to your cousin's funeral. We really appreciate your being here.

My name is Christine Fyffe. I am the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and I am presiding here for the rest of today while you are having your debates. Welcome to the Schools State Constitutional Convention for 2014. It is my pleasure to introduce to you the Parliamentary Secretary for Education, Mr Clem Newton-Brown. In November 2010 Mr Newton-Brown was elected to the Parliament of Victoria as the member for Prahran. He previously served in elected office as the deputy lord mayor of Melbourne from 2000 to 2001. I ask you to welcome our first guest speaker today, Mr Clem Newton-Brown.

Delegates applauding.

Mr NEWTON-BROWN — It is a great privilege for the students here today to be presided over by the actual Speaker of the Victorian Parliament. Christine is here when we debate bills that come through this Parliament. She has great experience and you will learn a lot from her today about the conduct of debates. I would also like to thank Graham for his welcome to country. It is good to pause and reflect on our state's Aboriginal history when sitting in a magnificent building such as this one, which was constructed during the gold rush boom in Victoria. It is a magnificent building that would never be built again.

It is also good to remember that this building was not always here. For tens of thousands of years there was a rich culture in this place. If you look, you can actually see some remnants of that culture. If you walk through the parliamentary gardens, there is an old scar tree where bark was taken off to make a canoe. If you walk down to Queens Bridge and look over the bridge at low tide, you will see some rocks by the side of the bridge. They are the remnants of a waterfall which used to stop the saltwater coming up the Yarra River at high tide. This area was such a rich place for Aboriginal communities because there was freshwater above the falls and saltwater below, which was good for fishing. I pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land and elders past and present.

This program has been going for 20 years, so well done to you all for being selected to speak in this place. I understand that 25 of you will go on to Canberra for the national championships, so with about 100 of you here the odds are one in four, which is not bad. Good luck to you all. Students have a number of opportunities to speak in this place. There is the Schools State Constitutional Convention, there is also the Model United Nations Conference, the YMCA Youth Parliament and the Victorian Student Representative Council. It is great to see people coming into this place to experience speaking in this chamber. I was elected at the 2010 election, which was a privilege, and I hope I will be here in a month's time. To speak in this place is a privilege. It is a great experience for kids to have that opportunity as well. Make sure you enjoy the experience and use your time well.

Hansard is recording the proceedings. You will be able to read back the transcripts of debate and see what you said. If you mangle some sentences and get things totally wrong, the Hansard people will generally fix it up. You end up sounding better than you actually did once Hansard finishes transcribing it. It is not an exact record of what you say in the chamber, but it is pretty close.

I understand you will be talking on the topic of a budget crisis, and, as Graham mentioned, you will have lots of opportunities to talk about all sorts of things, including health, disability, education, social welfare, technology, foreign aid and the economy — it is a broad-ranging topic. I understand you have been given media reports and no doubt you have done your own research as well on the topics. How long do you speak for?

The CHAIR — Two minutes.

Mr NEWTON-BROWN — Two minutes. How many of you think you will have exactly 2 minutes of debate? No-one? That is actually a good thing. If you had have stuck your hand up, I would have said that that is not really the way you should do it, because in this place is about a debate; it is not just about reading out speeches. As new members of Parliament one of the challenges you have is to stand up in a place you are not familiar with, and it is very easy to use the safety net of having notes and a perfectly-timed speech for the time you have to speak. If you have done that, go out on a limb today. Cut out a few paragraphs and use those 20 to 30 seconds to respond to someone else's argument. Listen to other people's arguments and meet those arguments so it is an actual debate. That will be a lot scarier than what you are probably prepared for but that is what it is really all about — learning to get on your feet and debate ideas backwards and forwards. It is a great opportunity.

Getting up and speaking in front of people, particularly in a formal setting, is something for which you need to seek out opportunities, and you have obviously done that. It is so important. Whatever job you may do in the end, whether it is being in here and speaking in Parliament or working in any other sort of job, the person who can stand up and confidently speak in front of a crowd will be the one who is noticed and the one whose career will progress faster than others.

Well done for volunteering and I wish you a great conference.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Clem, and thank you for spending the time with us in what is a busy period in your campaign. Clem has a marginal seat in an electorate where the residents change over far more than in any other seat in Victoria so he has to continually be on the mark and be out there trying to get the votes, particularly now.

Our next speaker is Kris Schroeder. He is one-third of the Melbourne band, *The Basics*, and now the ‘The Basics Rock’n’Roll Party’. He is a Melbourne boy, raised in Frankston. After completing his bachelor of communication, specialising in journalism, Kris has had a varied working life, spending time with Fairfax Media and Australia Post before heading to Africa for three years with the Kenya Red Cross Society.

Mr SCHROEDER — Just before I start I would like to recognise the traditional owners of this land, elders past and present, and the Kulin nation.

Thank you for having me here; I have never spoken in a Parliamentary house before. I was invited along to have a chat about starting political parties, because I and a couple of mates from a band called *The Basics* have been in the process of doing that these last few weeks. We will know in the next week or two whether we will be part of the next state election. We are very close already and it is quite exciting, so this is a little taste of maybe things to come. I was invited here to talk about why someone would get into politics or why they would start a political party and I think the best way of answering that would be just talking a little about what has led me here.

As the Chair has graciously announced, I grew up in Frankston and attended The Peninsula School. I notice there are a few students from that school here today and I was chatting to their teacher representative who started, I think, only this year. I was going over old history of who is there and who is not. After The Peninsula School I went to Monash University where I did a bachelor of communication in journalism. I went to Fairfax Media and then on to Australia Post doing work force management.

The last three years I have spent in Africa with the Red Cross Society through the AusAID program. During that time, as I have already mentioned, I have been participating in a band called *The Basics* — for the last nearly 14 years actually. You may or may not know us but you might know our drummer. He and I started the band back in 2001. His name is Wally De Backer. He goes under the name Gotye and had a big song: *Somebody that I used to know*. You might have heard of that. He and I and our guitarist, Tim Heath, had over the last few years been interacting heavily with regional and rural schools in Australia and indigenous communities, particularly around issues of drug and alcohol abuse and teen suicide. The statistics are out there — the incidence rate is 5 to 1 compared to metropolitan areas. We have been using our music as a bit of an icebreaker in getting through to people in those communities. We wrote and had funded through the federal government a number of programs where we went bush for a few months at a time, ran some classes, spoke with a lot of people and just interacted with people on a one-to-one basis as much as possible.

From that my interest in humanitarian aid arose and for the past three years I have been based about 100 kilometres outside of Nairobi in a town called Machakos which was Britain’s first settlement in east Africa before Nairobi was built. It is little place which has not changed much since probably 1952. They have photos everywhere of Princess Elizabeth visiting. I think they did up the town at that time and it has stayed much the same since then. I have been working with the local Red Cross branch which services about 4 million people in that area.

They are a semi-arid community so they have many issues around food security. A lot of people scratch their heads when they hear the words ‘food security’ — they think I am a mercenary protecting the food. It is not so much that, it is more about providing secure food sources. There are issues with drought. Every three years the same pattern of drought comes around and it is tough. There are a lot of social issues — communicating with people about weather patterns and just the regularity of these issues. A lot of people will say, ‘What do you know? You are not God’. They still have very deep-seated faith beliefs and they say, ‘We’re just going to do things our own way’, and they continue to grow maize crops, which you might know as corn, and as soon as there is no rain the crop fails dramatically. A lot of the issues we see around famine in East Africa are not the traditional ones you might see on TV with the babies and all that sort of stuff. It is mostly older people who are dying.

We were trying to introduce a number of initiatives around water harvesting and the diversification of crops. We wanted to introduce things like cassava, which is known as a desert crop and which is quite hardy, but it is also seen as a poor man's crop. In amongst doing all this humanitarian work there are social issues that arise that you end up spending a lot of time thinking about.

While I was there over in the last three years, particularly early last year in the lead-up to the federal election, we were getting even deeper into talking about how badly off we are and how hard done by we are as Australians. Living in an area where people's lives are a day-to-day, hand-to-mouth existence, you start to wonder how much of what we experience as Australians are social problems around expectation.

In returning to Australia we saw what happened in the federal election last year. It is an ongoing discussion all around the country; everyone has an opinion on it. It seems that everyone is unhappy about something these days. Even this morning you would have seen a number of people out the front protesting about animal rights issues. In our personal lives we have championed a number of causes, but it has got to a point where effecting positive change in our society currently requires a little more commitment. We have formalised our personal affiliations into what has become the Basics Rock'n'Roll Party, which is meant to be a bit of a joke as a name but it is not a joke as a concept. It has been a bit of a wild ride because all sorts of things were thrown about in the media in the early days about Wally running for prime minister and so forth. We had to tone that down a little bit. As the Greens have become increasingly the third power in our parliamentary system we saw an opportunity to engage with people again at a more grassroots level involving grassroots advocacy. We focused on Indigenous issues, education and innovation.

I encourage everyone to spend time overseas and to try to gain as much experience in the world as possible. In my humble opinion there are a number of people who have not spent as much time exploring the world as they should have and they are making decisions on behalf of us all.

Having gathered all of that experience and all of those lessons, we feel there is room for something like the Basics Rock'n'Roll Party. I suppose the rock'n'roll bit is to shake things up a bit. I encourage you to do that in your own experiences, whether that be by participating in one of the two main parties or in one of the other parties. It is important to ask questions. Why are things done the way they are? There is a lot to be taken for granted where we have built these systems of meaning for ourselves. Most of the time when something was done once 150 or 200 years ago, people just take it for granted, continue to do it that way and build further rules and laws around why it should be done to justify their own jobs. We are most interested in asking why things are done the way they are done. Formalising the process has resulted in the creation of the party.

That is one of the main reasons for getting into what is known as politics. A lot of people are hesitant to talk about what politics really is. They are a bit afraid of it, perhaps. Politicians are seen as people who are above our station. The media likes to create frames around the stories. You could call me a politician now, but I am just a guy. Between the three of us who started the party our experience has culminated in wanting to engage people in a more formal process. I did an interview with a journalist from the *Age* the other day.

Just so you know, the requirement for starting a party is to have 500 members from Victoria — and we are just running in the state election; there is no federal element. You need 500 citizens of Victoria who are on the electoral roll to confirm their membership with the Victorian Electoral Commission, so it is not a huge number. You also have to have a constitution, which was kind of fun to write, which talks about the legalities of what it is to be a party.

In discussion with the gentleman, we got down to the wires of creating a party. Aside from wanting to effect positive change from within, it is also about how anyone and everyone should be more involved with their democracy. We have compulsory voting here in Australia, and yet we are probably one of the least engaged populations in the world. Having lived in a number of other places, I have seen how active the citizens of other countries are. In America and in many parts of Africa people are engaged, and disengaged, but we just seem to have apathy and lethargy around engaging with the issues. We like to complain a lot, I suppose, and we see that as being engaged.

As I was saying to the people at the front of the Parliament, they got up, had their photo taken and then they were off to work, or uni, or wherever they were going. I guess being part of a system enforces the fact that it is a 24 hour a day, seven days a week thing. If you are going to stand for something, then you have to stand for it

100 per cent. We want to effect a change within the system. The other reason for starting the party was to give examples of how you do not need a degree in political science, you do not need to come from a particular background, you just need to care enough about issues to throw yourself in and to be ready to get beaten down, as we already have been in last few weeks.

The journalist was listening to me describe this. Some of you might be familiar with a band called The Velvet Underground, who in the 1960s released an album called *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. It only sold 500 copies. You might know Lou Reed, who passed away recently; he was a member of The Velvet Underground. The point of that analogy is that every one of the 500 people who bought the album went out and started a band. I guess what we are trying to do — what Wally, Tim and I are trying to do — is the same. For our 500 members, and anyone we are able to interact with, we want to give a bit of inspiration to become more involved.

You would have seen a lot of stuff just recently about Russell Brand, and whether or not you think he is funny, he raises some interesting points. One of the points — though not one I necessarily agree with — is about not voting. There are lots of ways of getting involved and becoming more aware of the issues, particularly at a state level. Federally, we talk a lot about asylum seekers, we talk about budget crises, we talk about the identity of the country, the recognition of indigenous people, and we are not quite aware of what state politics really involves. We hear vague things about the east–west link and deals done, but at a state level you can really effect positive change on a more practical level. I suppose that is one of the reasons that we have chosen to get in amongst our great state of Victoria, which we love.

To sum up what I am trying to say is that you do not need to be anybody special. I am a little bit special!

The CHAIR — Why?

Mr SCHROEDER — You have to be to get up here — at 9.30 in the morning!

All jokes aside, you do not have to have come from any particular background, you do not have to have studied anything in particular, it does not matter what part of the state you are from and it does not matter what ethnic background you are from. If you care about something, then there is room to become involved. Do not see it as something that is far off in the distance.

A lot of people say, ‘Oh, I would not be able to do that. You are so great for being able to do that, it is really inspiring!’ . But it is like, ‘Well, you could do it too’. It just requires deconstructing what it is that goes into doing this sort of thing. I encourage you to break down the barriers that you put in front of yourself in between the things that you wish that you were able to do and what you are actually capable of doing, because you are probably capable of a lot more. I am sure everyone would agree that there is room for fresh ideas and fresh voices. It does not have to happen today, tomorrow or next year. You do not have to do a degree in political science, as I said, or in politics, or even in journalism. You do not even have to do a degree at all if you do not want to, but get involved, become aware and gain a bit of knowledge about the issues that are facing us in Victoria and the positive changes that you can make in your local community. That is about all I have.

The CHAIR — Can I break away from the script, if you wouldn’t mind?

Mr SCHROEDER — I do not have a script.

The CHAIR — Sorry, I meant the time on the running sheet. Could I ask if anyone has a question that they would like to ask Kris, because it is refreshing that we have someone who does not belong to a major political party and who has decided to stand up and to fight for the things that he is interested in. I also come from an unusual background: I had to leave school the day I was 15 years. I was told, ‘You are leaving school today, my girl. You are going to work tomorrow’. I had no other education, but I have ended up here in politics. People come from all walks of life, and it is a passion. Has anyone got a question about anything Kris has said? Yes, young lady there, if you come up to the microphone, there is an on and off button — —

Mr SCHROEDER — You are going to sing the school song, are you? I will join you.

Ms GRAY — You spoke before about people taking you seriously in Parliament even though you have not studied anything specific. You said that the name for your party was a bit of a joke. Do you think that people could take it that you are not very serious if your name is a bit of a joke?

Mr SCHROEDER — Yes. There is that risk, but you know it is a calculated risk as well. If you do not mind me saying, there is a bit of a difference between say the Australian Sex Party, for instance, where I think one of the issues there was that it started as a lobby for a particular group. What we do is more of a talking point, I guess. As long as we have in our minds how we are going to say, 'It's not rock'n'roll; it's the spirit of rock'n'roll and it's the spirit of questioning. It's something to do with rebellion, but it's the spirit of injecting fresh ideas', it gives a bit of a launch pad. When you are dealing with those wily journalists — and I can tell you, just in my short experience, they are constantly going for the jugular — it gives us a bit of a launch pad to discuss, to break the ice and then to move on. You just have to really have your stuff down. You do not want to leave yourself open.

It is a very good question. It is definitely one that we talked about a bit at first, but it made the most sense.

The CHAIR — When I first heard of your party name, I thought, 'They're going to shorten it to 'R and R', which goes back to the Vietnam War when the Americans came to Australia. It meant 'rest and recreation' then. I thought you were going to say, 'All we're doing is fooling around' — which you did.

Mr SCHROEDER — Well, we did a little bit.

Mr E. CROSS — I commend you on starting this party. I was just wondering what your view point is. Yes, you are standing up for what you believe in and trying to influence change in yourself, but in relation to the major political parties do you think that a minor party like you have created has a real chance at influencing change? How would you go about that?

Mr SCHROEDER — Yes. Thank you for your question. I appreciate that. I guess there have been minor parties all along, so I cannot really say definitively that there is one way that a minor party can engage. I mean, just the fact that we call them major parties versus minor parties is one of the questions which, maybe as a journalist, I am most interested in. Why have we gotten behind these two apparently opposing forces?

How would a minor party influence positive change? This is a bit of a trial run. We are seeking a seat in the Legislative Council, which is the upper house, which I believe you can introduce legislation into, but most of it involves reviewing legislation that has been introduced by the Legislative Assembly, so it is looking at those introductions through your own set of ideals and your ideologies. It is based on your party constitution and what you have arrived at. Again, what chance do we have at influencing positive change? It comes down to that twofold thing of people like you seeing what we are doing and saying, 'Hey, this is something that I can do that I am interested in'. It might not be now. It might be in 5 or 10 years time. Hopefully it is just reaching out to people.

Ms RANE — I want to know about the conflicts that you faced. For example, you said that you come from Frankston. You brushed it off a bit, but I would like to say I live in Frankston and I go to the Peninsula School so we kind of share similar backgrounds so far. What I want to know is: have you faced any discrimination going into politics over, for example, not having the qualification or courses which you said are not really necessary? I just want to know if you have faced any kind of major conflicts or discrimination.

The CHAIR — That is a very good question. Was coming from Frankston a discrimination, given that Mr Shaw has made Frankston a big name?

Mr SCHROEDER — I think the Geoff Shaw thing has definitely come up a number of times, but I think he has taken most of the heat for us. I live in Northcote these days, but my mum and brother still live down there, and my sister lives in Carrum Downs. I think it is actually quite grounding, and if people are going to discriminate against you for that, I have got a word for them but I am not going to say it here.

The CHAIR — No, please do not.

Mr SCHROEDER — It starts with ‘I’. It is probably not what you thought it was going to be. As far as the geographical location, not so much, but yes, again in the media people like to say, ‘Who are you? What do you think you can do? You haven’t done this. You’re not a member of this. This is your background; what makes you think you can do this?’. The question will be ongoing until it is not, I suppose.

I do not see it as discrimination. It is more that the media have a point. They love to play devil’s advocate, and you just have to play ball and, again, have your story and your message straight. That is not to say I have got someone onside, as a lot of politicians do, saying, ‘Now you’re going to have to talk about this and this and this’, like when Simon Crean came to my university when I was still there. That was the first time I had seen a politician give a talk in front of cameras. He had his chief of staff or whatever, who was his media adviser, next to him. I do not think there were many of his own words that actually came out of his mouth that day. I did see him on the tram the other day.

The CHAIR — The media adviser?

Mr SCHROEDER — Simon Crean. He sat right behind me, and I got a perfect selfie with him sitting there.

The CHAIR — Are you using that as an endorsement?

Mr SCHROEDER — Yes. That’s the guy! I do not know; it is an ongoing question. I guess we are going to be feeling our way a lot over the next little while. I appreciate you asking.

The CHAIR — Kris, I am going to have to stop and get back to the running sheet. Thank you so much for coming; it has been interesting meeting you. Surprisingly, despite my vintage and our differences in ages and parties, I have sympathy for some of the things you have talked about.

Mr SCHROEDER — Thank you so much.

The CHAIR — I wish you well, but not too well!

Mr SCHROEDER — Thank you very much.

Delegates applauding.

OPENING STATEMENTS

Australia is in a ‘budget crisis’ and all Australians must share the burden — directly and indirectly

Ms JI (Koonung Secondary College) — Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am feeling lucky to be the first person to speak. As we all know, we are talking about the topic of Australia’s economic budget crisis. What is the Australian budget? It basically relates to anticipating changes in the levels and composition of federal government revenues and expenses for the year ahead.

The Australian economy is currently in deficit, which has resulted in a revenue and fiscal problem. However, our belief is that it is up to Australians to take responsibility for bringing the budget back into surplus. One area much debated area is the education system. Budget funding is constantly being cut and redirected, and the money is being taken from one area, like universities, and given to another area, such as schools. The proposed cuts to university funding and deregulation of university fees will make it much harder for young people to receive a tertiary education, and all this without improving the budget situation for the future. Education must always be prioritised.

The CHAIR — Does anyone have a question for Jenny or a comment they would like to make?

Mr MacCUSPIE — Does the speaker believe that the role of the government is to deliver a surplus or to deliver essential services to the citizens who make up its constituency?

The CHAIR — Good question.

Ms JI — Awesome question. The budget crisis is caused because the government is not getting enough revenue from tax.

The CHAIR — Is your answer to him then that the budget is not getting enough revenue to provide all the services they want to?

Ms JI — Yes.

The CHAIR — But his question was: is it more important to be in surplus or to provide the services, so they go into debt.

Ms JI — It is most important to have a surplus. If the government invests the budget in a railway, not in the short term but in the long term, it is about how you claim.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Jenny. Our next speaker is Jacob Mildren from Wodonga Senior Secondary College.

Mr MILDREN (Wodonga Senior Secondary College) — In north-east Victoria we face a few different issues compared to a lot of city students. A lot of people ask: what is a budget crisis? Is it a physical thing or something that is beaten up? To me, a budget crisis — ‘crisis’ being the operative word — is when the government cannot afford to pay its day-to-day expenses and cannot afford to continue to operate as a government. By that definition, Australia is not in a budget crisis. We can afford to pay our expenses. Sure, it is very clear that we are in a deficit, but why does that mean we have a crisis? I feel the budget crisis is a political catchphrase put out simply to win elections, to win government and to win power.

One great example I have seen comes from the OECD and shows that Australia is listed as having a general government deficit of 56 per cent of its gross domestic product. Compared to other nations and other countries across the world, that is very good. One example is Ireland, which has a general government debt of 125 per cent of GDP, and then all the way up to Japan, with a general government debt of 235 per cent of GDP. To me, it seems as though Australia is sitting quite pretty.

Every person definitely needs to share the burden in some form, but it must be done equally. We see that people from the country do not necessarily have the same funds as people from the city, so burdens should be shared equally. It is not just a one-size-fits-all answer.

The CHAIR — Any questions or comments?

Ms de LACY — You said that the burden must be shared equally. This suggests that all people would have to, say, pay the same amount of taxes. Would ‘equitably’ be a more suitable way to describe what you are suggesting?

Mr MILDREN — Thank you for your question. I feel that everyone should pay a share equally in taxes, directly or indirectly. People who make less income will pay a percentage of income in tax and people who make a higher income or people with a big business will pay a percentage of their income in tax. It is scaled person to person, to their circumstances, but everyone shares the burden equally across their circumstances.

Ms VO (The Peninsula School) — Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is my honour to be an opening speaker in today’s convention. We as Australian citizens are by all means privileged to be living in this perpetually thriving nation, regardless of the difficult circumstances that we may encounter. The 2007–08 global financial crisis has significantly harmed the economy of many countries, especially those in Europe, but it has merely had an impact on that of Australia. Our nation quickly recovered from the GFC and levitated to become the most economically growing country in the world. It ascended from ranking no. 9 in the world’s most economically growing countries in 2008, when the GFC struck, to no. 1 in 2013. This astounding statistic gives us every right to believe in our nation’s sustainable economy.

If our economy is so stable, how can there be a budget emergency as announced by the government? This terminology is rather controversial. Even though it is inarguable that we lack funding, many believe that the issue does not have enough detrimental effects on the economy to be deemed as a crisis; rather ‘deficit’ is a more suitable term. We would take on a novel perspective of young citizens on how accurately to define the issue we are encountering. Regardless of how we identify the issue, the lack of budget is undeniable. It remains of high importance and requires immediate solution. As Australian citizens we all have the responsibility to

contribute to disentangling this enigma. We need to have a firm opinion on how to invest our budget to further assist the government to reduce our deficit and even create a surplus.

There is a plethora of solutions, but the two most prevalent are increasing taxation and reducing funding in a number of fields.

The CHAIR — Sorry, your time has expired.

Ms GORA-IVANOFF — I was just wondering which of the two solutions you propose we should use to fix the budget deficit?

Ms VO — The two solutions I was about to propose are either increasing taxation or budget cuts in specific fields, which are some of the points we are going to discuss in today's convention.

Ms PAVIA (Lalor Secondary College) — Good morning, students, teachers and distinguished guests. Today we congregate to address the prompt, 'Australia is in a 'budget crisis' and all Australians must share the burden — directly and indirectly'. Australia's budget has generated a diverse range of responses. It has been argued to be a significant weight directly positioned on the shoulders of Australians and to be an economic action strategy to continue building a prosperous future. Before deciding on an informed conclusion on this suggested burden we must consider the negatives and positives of its direct and indirect nature.

Let us begin with its benefits: an \$11.6 billion infrastructure growth package, a \$20 billion medical research fund and enhanced border protection have been announced. These are satisfying advantages to all Australian citizens, which will contribute to building Australia's future. However, could this be too good to be true? Despite this evidence, the aspects of the budget which are more prevalent and concerning to Australian citizens have been labelled as 'appalling'. Potential reforms to higher education have disrupted the hearts of students across the country due to the fear of a system of higher fees, bigger student debt, reduced access and greater inequality, as stated by Bill Shorten. Perhaps it is not the vital shot in the arm we all need. In addition, the \$7 Medicare co-contribution, an increased retirement age and the tightening of the family tax benefit have caused an uproar among the infinitely struggling families of the lower socio-economic class.

So I pose this question to you all: is Australia's controversial budget going to deliver balanced and credible budget repair or will it continue to be an inconvenient factor of Australian life that provokes frustration and extreme actions for change?

Ms BOLT — I was just wondering if you have trust in the government that it has made the right decision in pouring money into certain areas which you listed, such as border protection and medical research?

Ms PAVIA — Personally I do have a bit of trust in the government in regard to medical research; however, whether this will be effective or not has not been determined as of yet.

Mr O'CONNOR (The University High School) — Before we start talking about the debt crisis or the budget crisis, we have to really ask ourselves whether there is one at all. Repeals of the carbon and mining taxes suggest not, or at least that the Liberal government do not think so. The Liberal government would of course have kept these taxes if they actually believed that they had to get us back to surplus, because those two taxes alone would bring in the most revenue of any introduced taxes.

Cuts to education: are they part of the problem or part of the solution? It is hard to ask and hard to answer. Will that be immediately effective? Yes, but in the long term cuts to education will be quite costly to our surplus. Note that there is no reason that debt should halt any economic growth in a country. There is no reason to bear a burden in a country like Australia, with such a strong GDP. Our debt to GDP ratio is fine, to be honest — that is to say, we are earning a lot more money than we are gaining in debt every year, so we are pretty stable in that sense.

Introducing a \$7 medical fee to go to a doctor is another reason families are at a loss, whereas companies are at a gain. I suggest this budget is hitting the poorest families harder, so it is a crisis for some but not for all. Large companies will not be affected so harshly by this budget, but it is easy to say that it is a budget crisis for families and the poor rather than the government and the companies that are leading revenue in Australia.

Mr AL-SALIHI — I think you mentioned in your speech that on paper Australia's debt to GDP ratio is at 24 per cent, and that is not a cause for concern. Do you not recognise that perhaps the term 'budget crisis' refers to the allocation of funds throughout our society and the government's responsibility to certain sectors of our society?

Mr O'CONNOR — Yes, absolutely. The federal government is saying that we have to introduce a harsh budget and not spend too much money. To have a strong GDP and to get the balance right, you need to spend money to earn money. The government's scapegoat excuse that we need a harsh budget does play into the fact that our GDP will be negatively affected by the government not spending money. I hope that answers your question.

Ms FEALY (Mackillop College Werribee) — As the Treasurer of Australia, Mr Joe Hockey, stated in his statement on the 2014 federal budget, our future depends on what we do as a nation today. On 13 May 2014 he released the 2014 budget. This included changes and improvements to education, social welfare, health, disability, climate change, foreign aid and many more. The 2014 budget has caused controversy throughout the media and around the Australian family dinner table, with the main question being: how is this going to affect us, and is Australia actually in a budget crisis? The way the budget has been structured is part of the government's economic action strategy to repair and build a strong and prosperous economy. Today's government is looking to the future by focusing on lowering the national debt by nearly \$300 billion by 2023.

Australia's ability to manage public debt is quite strong. We are not facing any present or imminent debt crisis at the moment. The real crisis is the 1 million people who are unemployed. The Australian government has taken action. Some may question whether it is the right action, but Australia is one of the many countries which made it through the global financial crisis intact. Some label the budget as 'no pain, no gain'. It does tighten the belts of many Australians, with cuts to family benefits, tighter rules for payments for the unemployed and those with a disability, and changes to the pension. Fuel prices and taxes will rise to pay for our nation's debt. The budget gives the government the ability to plan its future spending, which influences the economic growth of the future. Senior students, job seekers and families will and have been hit the hardest, but is Australia actually in a crisis? The government has been left with an economy growing below — —

The CHAIR — The member's time has expired.

Mr MATERIA — The first thing you said was that Australia is not really in a bad position in terms of debt, and then you went on to say that the government's priority is to get that debt under control. Would you not think the priority right now would be to stimulate short-term growth and get the economy under control rather than risk a recession in trying to repay only a small bit of debt?

Ms FEALY — Could you repeat your question?

Mr MATERIA — The first thing you said was that Australia has a relatively low amount of debt. What I am trying to say is if you weigh up debt and deficit, should the priority not be short-term growth? Even though it would contribute to a little bit more debt, would it not be worth it in the short term to generate that growth and then worry about the debt later — sort of like looking at your priorities?

Ms FEALY — I believe that debt is not actually a problem at the moment, so whatever we do now, no matter what, we are not going into recession. Yes, it is possible that we will, but I believe we will not, because we have a strong economic system.

Mr WALKER (Mount Clear College) — There is no budget crisis in Australia. OECD data for 2013 has the Australian government's debt at 34.39 per cent of GDP, which is well below the OECD average of 110.29 per cent. What we have is a structural deficit, low productivity, high unemployment, high levels of growth in government expenditure and inadequate levels of revenue. Any talk of a budget crisis or budget emergency is political spin designed to soften up an electorate to measures that amount to austerity.

Australia spends 9.5 per cent of GDP on health services, compared with the 5.3 per cent of GDP that our government spends on education. To ensure that Medicare remains sustainable a \$7 GP co-payment should be put in place. Social welfare should be able to help people onto their next stage in life. Changing the eligibility for the Newstart and Youth allowances so that people under 30 must wait six months before receiving payments will consign vulnerable young people to poverty.

Education is a powerful agent of change that ensures greater economic and social growth, yet school funding will be cut by \$30 billion over the next 10 years through increasing funding at lower rates. Universities will be deregulated, allowing them to set their own fees, and potentially locking the students like us out of high-performing universities.

On the issue of climate change Australia is falling behind. In direct contrast to other cost-cutting measures, the government will spend \$2.55 billion to pay big polluters to stop polluting. In a supposed budget crisis this seems absurd. Foreign aid goes a long way to addressing issues such as extreme poverty in our region and around the world, yet this government will cut foreign aid by \$7.6 billion over five years, ensuring that foreign aid spending is not even 0.5 per cent of GDP. Balanced spending and direct strengthening of the economy will achieve a fairer, more united Australia. Thank you.

Mr MacCUSPIE — You stated quite clearly at the start of your speech that Australia is not in a budget crisis; however, you then listed all the problems with the budget. Would you perhaps recognise that maybe the real crisis of the budget is where the money is being allocated and where the money is being cut, and that maybe we do have a budget crisis not because we are in deficit but because we are really focusing on the wrong areas and on the wrong things?

Mr WALKER — I do not believe there is a budget crisis, but I do think that government expenditure in some areas is growing too rapidly and in other areas spending and how spending is being targeted is not meeting requirements. So, we have unproductive spending with not enough outcomes.

Ms LAMBRINEAS (Genazzano FCJ College) — We are gathered here today to discuss whether Australia is in a budget crisis and whether directly or indirectly it is the responsibility of all Australians to share the burden of rebuilding our budget. In order to debate this we must first determine whether or not we consider Australia to truly be in a budget crisis.

Despite efforts by senior ministers of the coalition, the sense of crisis has not been entirely dispelled. The voices of many of our country's leading economists, including the heads of the Treasury and PBO, warn that repair to the budget is an imminent need after the debt burden left by the ALP Rudd-Gillard-Rudd government. However, as Independent South Australian Senator Nick Xenophon put it: a few weeks ago we were led to believe that the budget was on life support, and now we find that it is on a banana lounge on Hayman Island.

Labor's Treasury spokesperson, Chris Bowen, seemed equally perplexed. He said that the government had been sending 'confusing, mixed messages', and it was time to abandon the 'incoherent, illogical and inconsistent budget rhetoric'. Over the course of the day we will unquestionably encounter opinions illuminating whether or not we concede that Australia is in a budget crisis. However, it remains essential that we consider this: in July, Treasurer Joe Hockey told Parliament, 'if we do not address the budget crisis now, the pain associated with fixing it in 5, 10, 15 or 20 years is going to be far greater for Australians'.

If the Abbott government's speculations prove to be correct, the reality we face is that the friendly debates we now have the opportunity to participate in may well be carried into a course of action in future years. Assuming the budget crisis looms on our generation's horizons, there is no better time for this debate to take place.

Mr O'BRIEN — My question is about a number of very aggressive questions we have had today referring to the budget crisis in regard to the infrastructural issues we have had.

The CHAIR — I am sorry, but your microphone is not on.

Mr O'BRIEN — Would you not agree that issues such as the growing infrastructural deficit, and issues surrounding pensioners in 20 years time and the amount of money allocated to them, are simply issues addressed by the government in a budget and not some sort of crisis that is unique to the current situation?

The CHAIR — I should have said at the very beginning that when questions are asked in the house, they are often not answered in the way the person who is asking the question wants them to be answered. It is entirely up to you.

Ms LAMBRINEAS — Obviously you do not need a microphone there, Connor, you are quite loud.

The CHAIR — Touché.

Ms LAMBRINEAS — There have always been issues in our budget regarding the areas you have mentioned, but in light of the recent debt that Australia has encountered it is really important to reconsider what all our money is being devoted to to make sure we are not doubling up anywhere — that is, to reconsider where it is being delivered.

Mr J. CROSS (Scotch College Melbourne) — In my opinion Australia is not in a budget crisis, in terms of debt, as raised by Mr MacCuspie. We are in debt and our budget does face a prospective deficit, but both in my opinion are not nearly large enough for us to warrant the term ‘in a budget crisis’ in terms of us not having enough money.

While we are in debt, basically everyone is in debt. Almost everybody is in debt, because there has just been an economic recession. It would be foolish to expect that we could be 100 per cent in the black, in surplus, so quickly after a recession. What this comes down to, as mentioned in one of previous questions, is: is this about having a surplus, or is this about providing essential services?

In my opinion the government should first focus on essential services, rather than trying to think what it could cut. The first question it should ask is, ‘What do we need? What do our people need?’. Suggested avenues for cutting the budget outlined in the little book we have been given on cutting and budget slashing are: health and disability, social welfare, education, climate change and foreign aid. In my opinion to cut funding to or to privatise health would be a step in entirely the wrong direction, as that question should not even be asked. In my opinion we should all have access to free and full health care.

Next is social welfare and disability, which in my opinion should also stay. As you can see, I do not really believe we should make major cuts to health and disability, social welfare, education, climate change or foreign aid, because I believe they are all essential parts of our budget and that our government should focus on really trying to deliver full and essential services to each of these. Therefore if the opinion is yes, we are in a budget crisis and maybe we do need to slim down the budget a bit, then maybe we should look at other avenues rather than immediately thinking, ‘What can we cut out of health and what can we cut out of education?’.

Although this is a difficult question, perhaps we need to ask: do we really want to have less money in education? What would your kids think if through their school — well, you do not have kids yet; except for maybe some of you — they had very little in the way of education money or health money? If you had a disabled kid, what would you think about disability?

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Ms BOLT — Do you not believe that we should cut funding to issues like climate change while we still are not quite sure whether it is a real thing or not?

Mr J. CROSS — If I could vote green, I would. Personally, I believe that climate change is not an issue about which we can say it is real or it is not real, because you will not find a scientist who does not believe in climate change. Come on! Seriously, I ask delegates to step out of that mindset of, ‘I don’t really think climate change exists’. We cannot cut funding to climate change initiatives, because in my opinion we are going to very quickly realise the consequences of what we have been doing in terms of just oil, oil, oil and getting rid of climate change initiatives. Guys, come on, open your eyes. It may hurt a little, but we need climate change initiatives.

Delegates applauding.

Mr CHOONG (Camberwell Grammar School) — According to the Australian Office of Financial Management, Australia’s government debt to GDP ratio stands at 20.48 per cent. This is considerably lower than for other developed economies. For example, Germany, widely considered the economic powerhouse of Europe, possesses a ratio of 78.4 per cent, whilst Japan, the world’s third largest economy, boasts a staggering 227.2 per cent. This raises the question of why some would consider Australia to be in the throes of a budget crisis.

Ultimately a combination of government campaigning targeting the post-GFC paranoia of voters as well as repetition and exaggeration of the supposed ‘mess’ that successive Labor governments have left behind, as Joe Hockey would phrase it, has led to Australia’s financial situation coming under extremely close scrutiny and

unnecessary criticism. In addition, going into debt is required to continue to grow the economy and is in fact a very healthy and normal thing to do.

In terms of societal responsibility, it is my firm belief that everyone should contribute what they can with the resources they possess. Thus, those who have more should be obliged to give more, and vice versa. Under Australia's current proportionate taxation system, a common concern of high-income earners is that they are unfairly taxed more in a system that only funds 'dole bludgers' who proceed to waste their money on alcohol and cigarettes.

This overused stereotype has permeated society's views of tax spending, and many forget the good that comes out of Australia's fantastic publicly funded systems. As a result of them, we have the 7th best healthcare system in the world and the 13th best educational system. Furthermore, our taxation system redistributes wealth and importantly gives those who may not be from a wealthy socio-economic situation the chance to have equal opportunities. As Australian citizens it is our responsibility to help everyone, no matter how much we earn or who we are.

Mr ZATTRA — Do you reckon it is not a fact that the dole bludgers who have cigarettes and alcohol are lazy and do not want to find work? Do you attribute this dole-bludging system to the toughness of the economy and the inability of people to find work at the moment?

Mr CHOONG — I would say that the entire dole bludger stereotype is completely wrong. I think that the view of Australian society of tax spending has been tarnished by maybe the 1 per cent — or even less — minority of people who may be like this, who are lazy and do not earn money or who abuse the taxation system. I am saying that the taxation system is in fact very beneficial and we should not allow this stereotype to mean that we do not pay taxes and we do not want to.

Ms CHALMERS (Northcote High School) — Like many other speakers, I question whether Australia is really in a budget crisis. We are all aware that Australia is not in surplus, but that does not automatically qualify us as being in the midst of a budget crisis. As this is a country that managed to make its way through the global financial crisis relatively unscathed, there are no excuses to make cuts and raise taxes in a way which disadvantages people from low-socio-economic backgrounds disproportionately in the hope that we can bring the budget back to surplus. GP co-payments, cuts to family benefits, changes to social welfare and cuts to TAFE and university funding are all ways the current government proposes to bring the budget back to surplus. However, these measures leave the most disadvantaged behind.

We should instead be focusing on companies and individuals who are avoiding paying taxes on their large profits. In a recent report it was found that a third of all Australian companies are paying an average effective tax rate of just 10 per cent. In the same report it was also found that the company James Hardie paid zero per cent, Sydney Airport paid 2 per cent and The Star casino in Sydney paid just 5 per cent. Is this really fair and good, when many ordinary Australians are expected to pay, on average, 20 to 30 per cent income tax? It is alarming that those earning large profits can pay such low taxes legally, and we as a nation must take a stand to ensure that the richest individuals and companies are paying their fair share before we declare a budget crisis and make the poorest pay.

Mr PRUDEN — Can you explain to the house why Australia's largest companies — which, by paying less in tax, have more money to grow their companies, which means they employ more Australians, which in short lowers the unemployment rate — should be taxed more? In fact those huge profits go to the people who own them, who then pay personal income tax — which, you were quick to point out, is paid by people in quite high amounts. Why tax those businesses more, meaning that they will not grow as fast and employ more people, thus lowering our economy? Why do you believe that is a good thing?

Ms CHALMERS — I am not talking about increasing the tax that companies pay; I am talking about making sure that companies earning substantial profits are paying their fair share. A company paying an effective tax rate of zero per cent through loopholes is not fair. We are talking about not raising it but just making sure that every company is paying a fair amount of their profits, to go back to people who are struggling in Australian society.

Delegates applauding.

Ms McDONALD (St Catherine's School) — Ladies and gentlemen, like many others, I do not believe that our lucky country is in a budget crisis. The government total debt is the third lowest in the OECD. As the economist Richard Holden stated:

... a crisis is when creditors start worrying when they will be paid — and start charging more for the money they are lending.

That is not happening to Australia. Yes, some people are hurting — our weakest and most marginalised, those who we should be looking after. Whilst I do not believe that the budget crisis exists, I do believe there is a major issue in our Australian economy, and that is the way that taxpayer money is being distributed. We need to change the way government money is allocated by reorganising the whole government system. We need the three levels of government to re-evaluate how it directs spending in order to stop all wasteful spending. Better yet, do we actually need three tiers of government? Maybe two tiers of government would be enough for a country of 23 million people. Governments need to check their spending, companies need to pay appropriate levels of tax and people should be encouraged not to expect welfare payments. We should use social welfare spending to help the most vulnerable in society.

Education is the best way to counteract debt and our economic sins of the past. A strong education system with a highly educated population will put an end to climate change issues and will fix the health and disability issues of Australia, not the billions of dollars that are thrown into these departments every year. The more educated Australians are as a society, the better off we will be financially as well as socially. As Nelson Mandela said, 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world'. Through the act of allocating more money towards education, not only will we change the social welfare of Australians — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Ms STENTS — With the population expected to double in the next 50 years, do you not think the three tiers of government are absolutely necessary to control this population, which will definitely surpass 23 million people?

Ms McDONALD — That is something to take into account when it comes, but at this current moment with the three tiers of government it is just too many people speaking at once about expenses that are being thrown every which way. However, when the population does grow, as I am sure it will, then I think it is time for us to re-evaluate the three tiers again and work with it from there.

Mr CHARVILLE (Sunbury College) — It is indisputable that having a budget in surplus is of benefit, as it assists our balance of payments in the primary income statement and provides our nation with a buffer for any unexpected cost or future economic instability requiring a negative imbalance in government spending. However, when attempting to achieve this goal through reducing spending and increasing taxes, we must ensure that we do not dig our own grave through reducing aggregate demand by discouraging consumption and investment spending. By declaring an emergency and making such radical budget decisions, it is argued that we may cause just what we are preparing for.

The 2009 global financial crisis was a reminder to all of us how suddenly economic turmoil can occur. We were fortunate enough to hold a surplus inherited from the Howard federal government, which, as many people have made the point, was the sole reason for our nation's economic survival. This is an example of how an unexpected event may rely upon the government's ability to suddenly find available funds.

This budget, although seemingly harsh now, is a budget to prepare us for the future and is for the benefit of you and me 10 years from now. The state of the federal budget today is certainly undesirable, and it is imperative that we develop a surplus as soon as possible, bringing merit to the declaration of a budget emergency. Today we must consider the benefits of a budget surplus in the future over the deficit we are burdened with today, the costs we now face and also the urgency of the issue at hand.

Mr O'CONNOR — You mentioned that we should be looking at the issue from the perspective of 10 years from now and what will be beneficial then. Do you think the Liberal government or any government is really worried about what is going to happen 10 years from now as far as their popularity is concerned?

Mr CHARVILLE — There are four economic goals for governments. One of them is sustainability. What that means is we are not just looking at what is of benefit for today, but also for the future. We want economic growth 10 years from now. We do not want to hit a wall and all of a sudden just drop off, lowering both material and non-material living standards.

Mr ZATTRA (John Paul College) — This budget has been controversial in many ways, including the introduction of big cuts to many areas of government expenditure to try to curb the growing budget deficit that the government has identified as being around \$30 billion for this financial year. It is clear to see that through the election of Tony Abbott and the Liberal Party we have seen a much stronger focus on controlling federal government spending. The trend is sharply continued in the financial year 2014–15, with budget measures predicted to bring in \$38.4 billion in savings.

However, as a student who is hoping to attend a higher education institution after high school, I feel that for the most part these budget measures are unreasonable and unnecessary. For example, privatising the higher education sector will create a capitalistic attitude in the universities. In doing this, the extra costs will be directly passed down to the students, plus the universities will be able to raise their fees as they like without government regulation. Also directly in the spotlight is the privatisation of other public government sectors, such as Medicare, about which a bill is being debated in the federal Parliament right now. Studies in the history of the private US healthcare system show that once the system is privatised there are winners such as the rich, who are easily able to pay for the increased costs that a privatised system brings. But the losers, such as the poor and others who struggle and their families, are hit much more severely. This a major problem the current government has brought upon itself.

Measures are also planned to privatise Australia Post and even Qantas, not to mention the government's other bungled measures like the Medicare GP co-payment and the failed introduction of the work for the dole scheme. The government has so far proved incompetent on adequately judging appropriate methods for reducing the budget deficit without seriously impacting on working-class Australians and Australian students, who across the board form a major part of our working sector and impact the bottom line revenue of government. These measures will lead to less tertiary uptake and the continuing problem of those who are not contributing to the society's economy.

Ms TEMOS — You mentioned the impact on the lower class and the upper class. What do you think the effects are going to be on the middle class?

Mr ZATTRA — In terms of the budget, the middle class will be affected, but not as much as we would like. It is important that this government reconsider the budget to improve taxation measures on the middle class, because historically in Australia middle-class people are not as affected as much by budget measures; the impact is usually on the higher class or the lower class. I would say the middle class usually gets off with a bit of a slap on the wrist compared to working-class Australians.

The CHAIR — We have come to the end of those who are listed to make statements and we have 15 minutes to spare. What I am thinking, and you do not have to do this because you are not prepared for it, is that if I give you 1 minute those who have not made a statement or asked a question could offer an opinion.

MS CURTIS — I would like to address the fact that 8 out of our 14 speakers today have said that Australia is not in a budget crisis. One even said that it was a political catchphrase. There have been multiple polls this year that have said that this is the worst budget in Australia's history. The public disrespect for this budget is disgusting. Is it not the government's responsibility to see what the public sees and see what they want for their country? This is a budget crisis because were not representing the public's view.

Mr SHEMMELL — We have talked a lot about cutting funds from places which we should not be cutting. We are cutting education, and education is really essential; health is essential. Those are very specific things, and I agree with everyone who has said that funds to those areas should not be cut. We are upping defence. If you cut defence funding, you do not really cut jobs; you do not immediately make cuts that affect the average Australian. We are not really at a point where we are at war with anyone specifically, except for the war on terror, and no-one is going to come to Australia right away in fleets. Fighter jets are not going to be useful then; they are what we have paid for.

We need to assess where we are spending and what we are spending. Cuts need to be made to suitable areas that are not going to affect people who are really going to feel the hit.. When you think about where we are cutting you also need to think about who bleeds.

Mr SPARSH — I am going to ask a question rather than make a statement. There has been a lot of talk about unnecessary spending and how, as the speaker before me mentioned, we are spending money on education and health care. Where do you suggest we make up the money if we do not spend on education and health care? We mentioned defence and how that would not, apparently, affect the average Australian. Firstly, the defence force is one of the largest employers in Australia. Secondly, the threat of terrorism is very real, as can be seen by the fact that ASIO has upped our security level to the highest it has been in a long time — just a couple of weeks ago the ISIL flag was raised in a Sydney primary school — so if we are talking about unnecessary spending, can we provide some concrete solutions? We do not want to tax education; we do not want to tax health. Where do we get the money from? That is my question to all of you.

Ms JANSSEN — It seems to me that the current budget is really intent on creating a divide between people of high and low socio-economic status. I feel that the main intent of the budget is to support people in positions of disadvantage, so in terms of privatising sectors of government such as Medicare, higher education, tertiary education et cetera, more support needs to be given to people who need assistance, especially in education. By privatising these sectors the government is affirming people in positions of strength and undermining the people who need support. I do not know if it is a crisis or not but that is what the budget is failing to do currently.

Ms SHAH — One of the first things I would like to say up about the budget is in relation to cuts to education. The Liberal Party focuses on the economy and Australia long-term while the Labor Party focuses on progressing and Australians right now. The Liberal Party has made cuts to TAFE education and university and introduced higher university fees. I think this is ridiculous because we should be getting into university based on how well we do, not based on how much money is in our parents' wallets. We should not have cuts to TAFE because we need people to do labouring work. We cannot just support academics and not have workers such as those. I think that having more people who are uneducated and not going to university because of the fees will have a huge impact on the economy long term. There will be fewer jobs in the future and the economy is going to go way down as a result.

Ms KOSTELAC — The current government has ceased to realise the impact that the budget will have on youth — that is, the leaders of our future. University is supposed to be a time in a young adult's life when they set themselves up for the future. However, this budget is setting up a future of debt, stress and non-stop problems. Under deregulation by the end of this decade medical students will pay around \$116 970 at the completion of their degree. Students of science will pay around \$92 444 while law students will pay around \$90 040. These are just a few of the future innovators who will suffer as a result of this budget. What era are we in? This is not the 19th or early 20th century where only wealthy males got the opportunity to be educated. This is 2014, where every single person, no matter what their age, socio-economic background, gender or race can get a — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Ms ONG — In talking about the budget crisis today, I think we can all come to an agreement that we are not in that big a crisis in terms of the budget and deficit. The greater issue here is the crisis in the Australian identity. Going back to the days of the gold rush, however long ago, we have always been proud of our egalitarian society, where everyone gets a fair go. Questioning whether we should cut health, disability, education and social welfare puts our identity into question.

Our crisis here is whether we want to change the Australian identity. For example, should we put defence before our fair go, so that not everyone has an equal opportunity to get an education and perhaps strive for more than others with their background have? Politicians here do not have to have a university degree. I think the crisis here — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Mr DIXON — During the global economic crisis we saw countries go into heavy debt, including Australia. But it was thanks to the Labor government of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard that we fared much better than those in other countries. I think the Liberal government is purely putting what they want on the agenda, which is

cutting taxes and raising other things, as a way of saying, 'It's not because of us; it's because of the previous Labor government'. What they are trying to do is use the Labor government as a scapegoat. They are simply looking at what the Labor government did and attacking their actions. The money Labor put up for families and schemes, was a means to an end. The Liberal government is simply attacking Labor's actions despite what they achieved, which was that the Australian economy ending up fairly well relative to other countries.

For anyone to say that Australia is in a budget crisis is relative. Other countries are much better off, so how can we be in a budget crisis when countries that are worse off are not.

The CHAIR — I thank you all very much. You have all spoken extremely well, and you have also been terribly polite to each other. This afternoon we have a session called soapbox which lasts for 30 minutes and in which anyone can stand up and speak. We will work out how many of you are interested in speaking and we will determine whether you get a minute or a little bit longer. When you go through your discussions later, if there is something you are passionate about please use that soapbox opportunity. Other people can get involved; you do not have to sit so quietly. I must say I wish the Victorian Parliament had been that way at question time. I think I can say 'order' in about 20 different tones of voice now.

Our next guest speaker is Mr Jadon Mintern, who is the ALP candidate for Morwell in the upcoming state election. Jadon is one of the youngest candidates running for a seat in the state election. He is currently 23 years of age. Jadon has been interested in politics since year 8. In year 10 he persuaded his secondary school principal to give him a place on the school council so that students had a voice.

Mr MINTERN — Thank you everyone for the invitation to be here today. I am really here to talk about how I started being involved in my community and student politics, which has led me to run in next month's state election. I grew up in the Latrobe Valley, which is about 2 hours east of here in Gippsland.

When I was younger, about six or seven, the Kennett government was in office, and part of that government's policy was to privatise the SEC. I am not going to go into that policy here today, but it had a major effect on the Latrobe Valley. The SEC was a major employer and a massive part of our community at that time. At a very young age I became politically aware. The whole community was talking about the impacts of government policy. My family and family friends were all being impacted on in some way by the decisions that were being made.

I grew up with those conversations around the kitchen table. As you get older you become more interested in the community you live in. I got involved in the student representative council, and I would hazard a guess that everyone in this room is on their student representative council. It was as simple as when I started at Trafalgar High School in year 7 there was a general consensus that everyone hated the uniform and wanted it changed. Over the next couple of years there was talk within the SRC about it, and we were always told that it was too hard, that it could not happen and that it was a school council decision and that we should basically get over it.

In year 9 I decided that I had had enough, and I spent most of that year talking to the principal and other members of the SRC trying to convince them that it was possible for us to change it. I spent about four months convincing my principal at the time, Mr Slater, that it was a good idea to put a student representative on the school council — that person being me. Eventually he agreed. As it turned out, he agreed a month before he retired. I do not know if he ultimately agreed because he was not the one who was going to have to put up with me, but whatever the case was, he agreed, and I started on the Trafalgar High School council in year 10.

I really enjoyed that, and it was my first view of, or I guess role in, governance and the decisions that have to be made, no matter how big or small an issue or level that is on. We did end up getting the uniform changed. Year 10 was spent basically surveying the students and getting to a point where by year 11 the uniform was changed. I also took that opportunity to completely restructure the SRC. Instead of it being an organisation that kind of just existed, I took the opportunity to write a new constitution and get the school council to pass that, so that the SRC and school captain positions are basically all set in stone. I have been back a few times. Apparently that move has caused dramas since for some of the teachers there, but it was my aim, essentially to solidify the student voice in that school. And we managed to do that.

After being on the school council for three years and being part of those decisions — whether it was on basics like the local curriculum or whether it was participating in the budget decisions for the school — I decided in the end that that was something I wanted to pursue. I think everyone has an opinion, and the difference between

having an opinion and getting involved is the desire to effect that change or want to see your views come to fruition. You are probably never going to go the whole way, but I think being part of the decision is one of the most important steps. What I have learnt too is that, as you go along, when there is a halfway position you should try to take it, because it is those incremental steps that will get you there.

Part of the way to do that is to find a good mentor, and I was lucky enough to find John Lenders, who was the Treasurer of Victoria — well, he was actually Minister for Education at the time and then a couple of months later was appointed Treasurer. John is now the Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council. It started with me emailing John and asking to do work experience in his office. My careers teacher at the time laughed when I told him that is what I had done and said, ‘Good luck getting a response’. I gleefully marched back into that office when I had a call from one of John’s advisers asking me to come down to Melbourne and meet with him to introduce myself and talk about the work experience.

I loved those two weeks at 1 Treasury Place, in the Treasurer’s office, and I kept going back. I think it was over four sets of school holidays following that that I spent the whole of the school holidays volunteering in his office. That was a massive eye-opener — for an 18-year-old to have the chance to see the workings of inner government and to see the state budget being put together was exhilarating. Of course I was not involved in the big decisions, but I did help to pick the photos that appeared in that year’s state budget. I almost got a photo of my sister in!

That experience further developed my interest. Through that period I joined the ALP and started getting involved in policy discussions. For me, the voice of young people is really important. We do have a view, but it is about expressing that view and having it listened to. I think that last step is the hardest, but it is also the most important, because many members in our community dismiss people our age as not being mature enough to understand the issues. Essentially they do not fully appreciate what you are saying.

That is where I think days like today are really important, because today’s topic about the budget crisis makes you question your own beliefs but also defend your views in the context of governance. Fundamentally, being in government is about making choices, making decisions — both federal and state — and delivering a budget every year. No matter who is in government, no matter which side of politics is on the government benches, there is only ever a finite amount of money, only ever a pot so big, and being in government is making decisions about where to allocate those resources.

I have been sitting for the last 15 minutes listening to the conversations, and they are the same conversations that governments have. I have never been in cabinet, obviously, but they are the same conversations that they have in cabinet — whether you need to reduce expenditure, and if so, where those cuts are going to be made, or if you have increased tax revenue, where those extra resources are going to be put. That really helps.

When you question yourself, and when you challenge your own views, that allows you to have a stronger position when you go out there to advocate for them and press your views. From here, you can do all sorts of things to get involved. You do not have to be involved in party politics. There are lots of people from here who, after university, may go on and not be involved in politics. This may be a fun experience, and you will leave it at that. For others, you will go to NGOs — non-government organisations — who advocate for an issue you are passionate about. They play a big role in our society in effecting policy change, whether it is environment NGOs like Environment Victoria or whether it is specific lobby groups. You do not have to necessarily become involved in the party politics to make a difference, but if you are interested in that, I would really encourage you to, no matter which side of politics you choose. It is really enjoyable, and I think it is very important for young people to be actively involved in our community.

Part of the reason I decided to bite the bullet and put up my hand to go for preselection for this state election is because we live in a democracy. We are very lucky to live in a democracy, and this house should represent the community. Without wanting to offend anybody in this room, I often put it that this house should represent our community and should not be a preretirement home for old white men. That is part of the reason it is so important to get involved, and I really encourage you to do that.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Jadon. I agree that we should represent the whole of the community. I am the oldest person in this house, but I am not offended at all by the youth. We do need that balance. We have had a very young member enter Queensland Parliament who is making a very good contribution. He has done very well — no, it was federal Parliament, sorry, wasn't it?

Mr MINTERN — Yes, Wyatt Roy. Yes, I would make the point that Wyatt Roy was elected to the seat of Longman in Queensland two federal elections ago. It is not a new thing. Paul Keating was elected to Parliament at the age of 26 in a western Sydney seat. John Hewson was also elected in his 20s, and way back in 1921 there was a 22-year-old elected to the federal Parliament. It is actually not a new thing.

The CHAIR — Did you research this to justify why they should choose you?

Mr MINTERN — No, I actually researched it later. It is not a new thing for young people to be involved, but it should be more common and should not come as a surprise, I guess.

The CHAIR — I agree with you. We need diversity of age, race, gender et cetera. We have 5 minutes for questions.

Ms SHAH — I am familiar with you. I am in the Young Labor Party, and I have done a few campaigning sessions with you and stuff like that.

One of the main concerns I have with being in the Young Labor Party and discussing politics on a daily basis is being a young woman of colour. I feel like in a discussion I am kind of degraded because of my status and being young. There is a lot of ageism going around, there is a lot of sexism and there is a lot of racism. That kind of improves when we have more people of different ethnicities and as Parliament becomes more diverse. It improved when Julia Gillard became Prime Minister. It definitely improves when you are 20 years old and running for Parliament. One of my questions is: how do you feel is a good way to keep strong and not give up when it comes to being a 20-year-old, being a woman and being someone who is not white?

The CHAIR — Can I just interrupt for a moment?

Mr MINTERN — Yes.

The CHAIR — The question is for Jadon, but when I came into politics I was against everything that everybody argues for because I did not come in until my 50s because I wanted my children to have finished school. I was told I was too old coming in, so the ageism applies both ways.

Ms SHAH — Okay.

Mr MINTERN — Ali, I would say never give up and never take no for an answer, but I learnt that never taking no for an answer has to be done in a respectful way. I guess that is what I was alluding to when I was talking about taking advantage of the interim steps when they are offered or when they can be achieved, because part of the challenge for young people is to not be dismissed. I think the easiest way to be dismissed is when you give people the chance to say you do not have respect for other people and other views and therefore they should not respect you, and they put both you and your views to the side.

Never give up, but do it in a respectful way when you do challenge people. Also find other people to support what you want to achieve. In your case Young Labor is part of that. For others it would be the Young Liberals or the Young Nationals or the Young Greens, because for various reasons everyone involved in those youth wings will be having the same challenges in one form or another. It is essentially about banding together and improving each other's skills. Within those groups there will be differences of opinion, so again you bolster your own abilities to be heard and work your way up and keep attending those senior party policy forums until you start annoying them — —

The CHAIR — And all those other people fall asleep.

Mr MINTERN — Just keep going.

The CHAIR — We have time for one more question.

Ms FEALY — My question is: what advice would you give to young people to allow our voices to be heard and our opinions to be heard?

Mr MINTERN — Get out there, and what I mean by that is, depending on what issues you think are important or you are passionate about, see what opportunities there are for you to be part of the decisions that are being made or at least be lobbying for those. Whether it is climate change or whether it is local public transport, often there are opportunities at a local government level. For example, for a couple of years I was on the Latrobe City Climate Change Consultative Committee. It is a group that discusses the practical elements of acting on climate change at a super-local level. Obviously the Latrobe Valley is home to the coalmines, so the policies that have been in place are not at a very practical level. Again, as a young person I wanted to make sure that the advice being given to Latrobe City reflected the broad community, so I found out about the consultative committee, applied to be on it and pushed the case. I did the interview at an officer level, but then I went above their heads and gave the mayor a phone call and said, ‘I really want to be on this’.

Identify opportunities within your community. If you get the opportunity, go to next year’s constitutional convention. Say yes to next year’s two or three-day convention in Canberra, where you will meet more people from across the country. I assume there will be guest speakers from the federal Parliament and other organisations based in Canberra.

The CHAIR — Thank you so much, Jadon. Please thank, Jadon.

Delegates applauding.

The CHAIR — One of the hardest things to do is to wish good luck to someone on the opposite side. I hope Jadon has a good campaign.

Sitting suspended 11.01 a.m. until 1.47 p.m.

SOAPBOX

The CHAIR — We are running behind time because delegates have had to come back through security. We have 10 more people still to come in, so I am going to use that opportunity. This is a real challenge for you, and I have to tell you that most members of Parliament would fail on this. We are going to have to cut the soapbox time down, which is a difficult thing. Are there five of you who would like to get up and speak for 1 minute each? I had better say something first to make this fair. Preference will be given to those of you who have not yet spoken. This is not reporting, this is your opinion.

Ms SCANDRETT (Kingswood College) — I believe the current political format is thoroughly removed from the general public. I believe the budget crisis and where we are directing money is not the big issue at the moment; it is the attitude of the government. It seems that no matter how hard we push, we cannot move the brick wall that is between the general public and the workings of politicians. I am not sure if this has always been the case, but it seems the current political format contradicts the ‘everyone gets a fair go’ Australian characteristic that the Australian community so vigorously pushes for. We can sit here today talking and going over the same ground again and again; but we need to make our opinions and actions louder, so that hopefully we can overhaul the rigid barrier that separates us from the political workings.

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Ms KAY (Genazzano FCJ College) — Regardless of whether or not Australia is in a budget crisis, we need to take action for the future of our country. An effective way to help with Australia’s future is to increase GST and lower income tax. Yes, GST is regressive, which means that it represents a greater percentage of a poor person’s income than that of a rich person’s income; however, GST is a tax on income. Generally rich people spend more than poor people, so it will be a balance of money.

REPORTING SESSION

The CHAIR — We are moving to the reporting session now. We have 10 groups reporting, with a maximum of 2 minutes each. If you can cut it down a little, we would all appreciate it. But it will be fine if you stay within your 2 minutes.

Group 1

Mr E. CROSS — Our group would like to address the fact that we do not believe that the current budget is in crisis; it is in deficit. We think the reason it is being called a crisis is due to the representative nature of government, in that the crisis as put forward has not been accepted by the general populace. Our aim is to try to reduce the deficit as much as possible. To put it as simply as possible, we want to increase social services, and that includes an emphasis on education. To fund this, we would like to look at cuts to external defence.

We acknowledge that Australia has international obligations, but seeing that Australia is such an economically strong country and a morally strong country, we believe that funnelling money into defence is not the best way to spend. We believe that is revenue we can access. At the risk of being punched, we say that we should bring back the carbon tax; the main reason being that it is a great avenue by which to gain revenue. It also promotes and addresses the needs of society for greener and more sustainable energy.

They are our three things, but more specifically in terms of social services we think the compulsory co-payment to access a doctor should be reduced, because it is acting as a deterrent. We have statistics to suggest that 13 per cent of low income earners do not want to go to the doctor because they do not want to pay. Also, the co-payment will increase the price of the medicines they can access. That is practically what we discovered.

Delegates applauding.

Group 2

Mr AHUJA — Our proposal seeks to redistribute government funds more equally in education, so that all Australians can have a fair go. The current budget gives, in our opinion, an unfair share of money to the private school system, which creates more inequality between private and public schools in Australia. Private schools have more facilities, better teachers and extensive financial bases due to high tuition fees and already have connections to existing establishments such as church foundations. This raises the question: why does our government still need to be putting money into an already secure industry?

Mr MATERIA — The money that we would save in cutting private school funding, we propose, should be collected into an education trust which supports local public schools and grants — I am sure Mr Abbott would like to say this — equal opportunity scholarships and financial assistance to students who would otherwise be unable to access university due to their socio-economic status. This would be an alternative to the proposed tertiary fee deregulation.

Group 3

Ms OLASCOAGA — My group deliberated on the topics we were given regarding health and disabilities. The members in my group felt that there should be a balance between the sustainability of Medicare as well as the provision of sufficient funds for the present generation. Most members of the group believe there should not be a co-payment involved with the health system. On education, we believe that HECS-HELP should be introduced into TAFE, and as to the deregulation of HECS-HELP funds, members were split in terms of being for and against that deregulation.

On climate change and change in emissions, most members were against Mr Abbott's decisions relating to climate change. On social welfare, some students believe that welfare has been abused relating to population groups and socio-economic status. On whether the parental scheme should be reviewed, the members of my group did not generally see the importance of the scheme. As for foreign aid, one member of the group stated that we are basically taking food out of starving children's mouths and buying guns with this money and that we have been using it in the wrong way. Our group thought it was ridiculous and was against cutting foreign aid.

Group 4

Ms PAVIA — Our group came up with various solutions for this budget. We came up with a goods and services levy, which basically means an increased GST percentage, moving from 10 per cent to 11.5 per cent on all goods and services purchased in Australia. Basically this money would allow us to maintain other services whilst cuts could be made elsewhere. Our second proposal was for a natural disaster response plan. Basically

this plan would allow Australia to recognise when it is obliged — and not obliged — to supply foreign aid to other countries.

We have also designed a social welfare and employment integration initiative. Under this proposal a new industry of employment could be created by the government, which would be sustainable. Basically we have come up with the effects of this on youth today. The money we would use from the increased GST would go towards the proposals mentioned above or other services. For young people this would increase job opportunities, social welfare and individual initiative, and decrease the number of people who have to be on the dole.

Group 5

Mr J. CROSS — First of all, our group thought that it was not a crisis. We acknowledged that we are in debt but did not think that our current debt situation warrants crisis mode. Our statement would be that the government should not remove money from health, education, social welfare, climate change initiatives and foreign aid, because we believe them to be essential, should accept the necessity of essential services over budget surplus and should look for avenues of savings in defence and in greater taxation to high-income earners in the private sector, with an emphasis on corporations based overseas. We also believe in bringing back carbon trading schemes in order to both encourage green initiatives and bring in more revenue. We believe that in some of these cases we will need to go into a little more debt and borrow, but we believe that this is perfectly acceptable and that the essential functions of government should come ahead of having a budget surplus.

Delegates applauding.

Group 6

Mr AL-SALIHI — First of all, we are going to have three reporters, who will report different sections of our views on the budget crisis. First of all, we outline that the crisis that we are outlining in this whole debate is not in terms of the budget deficit itself, but rather the public perception of the way the funds are being allocated. That is the crisis we are talking about. First of all, I will talk about the fact that we have agreed that higher education should be privatised and there should be HECS deregulation. That is mainly because we do not see any real harm to it, because we believe that in a free market society, where the price of higher education is determined by the market itself, through Keynesian economic ideals, the price could be lower than the current price, which is established by interference from the government.

Mr GORADIA — In terms of environmental sustainability and climate change, we advocate a system by which the government would not pay out rebates to those companies that pollute less, but, under our proposal, companies — traditionally large ones — would pay a form of environmental compensation according to the levels of pollution. This would result in a greater availability of funds for innovation into sustainable energy technologies. Furthermore, we propose that the distribution of social welfare be kept as it is under the status quo, in order to not further perpetuate the idea of dole bludgers. We also fervently support the implementation of a paid parental leave scheme.

Mr MUSTAFOVSKI — I am going to be speaking about foreign aid. We have come to the conclusion that when it comes to foreign aid there are some key questions that we need to be asking. Is there a possibility of cutting funding in the campaign against terror? Is it necessary and where is it necessary? Why are Australians now a part of the threat? This is the most important question we are asking because it relates to us. Is there a genuine threat? Is this issue more valid than international issues, such as ones in Papua New Guinea and East Timor? In fact with regard to the foreign aid figure of less than 0.5 per cent of GDP, it is a small amount of the budget, so it does not make a really big difference if we do not cut it out.

Group 7

Ms de LACY — We came to the unanimous decision that we are not currently in the middle of a budget crisis, but we think funds could be better allocated in the current budget. We think that all avenues that may allow for taxation minimisation should be closed, especially in terms of multinational companies. We also feel that education is a key aspect to solving society's problems. In particular we think that more funds should be allocated to educational programs that raise awareness, specifically in the area of cigarettes, alcohol and dietary behaviour. This will help alleviate social problems, which plague the budget allocation. This will also help to

alleviate the burden on the health sector as well as on social welfare because people will be better equipped to be self-sufficient and live healthy lives, which will contribute to the economy.

Foreign aid is another important component of our recommendations because through this we can address the causes of problems that we deal with in Australia, such as refugees and threats of violence. For example, if we take the aid directly to the source where people come from, in the long term we can stop refugees. That is a long-term goal that Australia can make, which can improve our situation in the future. Climate change is a real issue, and we hope to decrease its impact by increasing funding to research groups and encouraging the use of renewable sources of energy through the provision of financial incentives. Lastly, we would divert funds from the military, as we feel Australia is safe and insulated from security threats due to our advanced technology, regional treaties and allies.

Group 8

Mr MacCUSPIE — Our group came to the decision that Australia is absolutely not in a budget crisis and, if there is any crisis, that it is more in the allocation of funds, not in the actual amount of funds in the first place. We believe that all funds should be allocated in a fair and even way, and for that matter we support the allocation of further funds towards education, social welfare and support, which we believe are the most essential things for any citizen of Australia. On that matter, especially in the area of education, we believe in a fairer distribution of the money with a focus on teaching to improve the quality of our education within Australia, rather than the facilities or the quality of the buildings in which the education occurs. To facilitate this, we would privatise Qantas in order to save the government a significant amount of money every year. In addition, we would reduce spending on foreign aid in countries that no longer require it, such as China, and reduce spending in defence, both within Australia and internationally, specifically in operations such as Operation Sovereign Borders. We would also consider reducing offshore processing of refugees in order to save money and also to improve our human rights standards within the world.

Group 9

Ms KEOGH — Our group also decided that there was definitely not a budget crisis and that the reason that most Australians think this is the case is due to overinflated media attention and the political jargon that has been spread around. We do not believe there is a crisis, but there is the possibility of a crisis in the future if the spending that occurred during the Gillard and Rudd governments continues and the abolition of taxes by the Abbott government continues.

We feel, however, that the response made by the Abbott government in its recent budget is not acceptable. Cuts to areas such as health, education, social welfare and foreign aid have a negative effect on our economy. It hits people of low socio-economic status the hardest. It is harder for them to make a \$7 Medicare payment or to afford tertiary education if these cuts are made.

Our solutions were around increasing revenue and therefore increasing expenditure as well. We thought that the reintroduction of a carbon tax or an emissions trading scheme or a policy that is environmentally friendly would be a good source of revenue. We also thought that a mining tax should be reintroduced.

Group 10

Ms DAW — Our group thinks that cuts should not be made to education, health and disability services, social welfare and foreign aid. Firstly, budgets are more for nation building rather than staying in the black. In an economic downtime governments should inject more money into the economy. Cutting education is detrimental for the future. Access to health and disability funds is a basic human right. Social welfare payments go back into the economy rather than the welfare money which tends to go overseas. Did you know that there are 10 unemployed people per job vacancy? It is unrealistic to expect that all unemployed people go out and get a job. Most scientists agree that climate change exists and will have a greater impact than that of people killed by smoking cigarettes. If we develop strong diplomatic relationships, we benefit those who need foreign aid.

In conclusion, we believe that to combat the unsustainable reallocation of taxpayers money we should tighten the superannuation tax rate, provide more incentives for negative gearing and social gains, invest in international climate change research, ensure that there are no tax loopholes to make sure taxpayers are paying their taxes and cut mining subsidies.

The CHAIR — That is the end of the reports from all the groups. We will be voting on the actions proposed after the soapbox session. The soapbox is interesting. In that session you can talk about any topic to do with the budget. You do not have to talk in favour of your group if you dissent from one part of it. Please use that opportunity to put your views forward.

SOAPBOX

Mr BELL (Northcote High School) — I am of the firm belief that we are in a budget crisis. The budget that was delivered to the Australian population by Joe Hockey earlier this year is in crisis. This budget has been an assault on the Australian way of life and has contradicted every value that Australian citizens hold dear. Cutting services to address a negligible amount of debt is absolute madness. Many Australians are in debt — in fact everyone with a mortgage is in debt — yet the majority of Australians would choose to have a mortgage rather than lead the surplus lifestyle of homelessness. The reason the government is in deficit is because it is providing essential services on which Australians depend. There can be no greater justification for being in debt.

Mr BRUNETTI (The University High School) — Australia is a country known internationally for having a world-class healthcare service and quality public education, and this budget is really getting to the heart of these services. These are services Australians depend on every day. We cannot use getting the budget back into surplus as the justification for placing a \$7 co-payment on visits to a GP. This may not sound like a lot of money, but it adds up, and to the people who will be most affected by this co-payment, it really is a lot of money. If more people were going to the doctor regularly, we would have fewer people ending up in emergency departments and we would be able to save more money. If the government abandoned this plan for a \$7 co-payment, we would save more money in the long run in the healthcare area.

Ms TRAN (The Mac.Robertson Girls High School) — Today a lot of people have pretty much agreed that we are not in a budget crisis. Therefore I reckon that we should increase our foreign aid as there will be many benefits. Currently Australia is a really good global citizen compared to other countries and increasing our foreign aid would reduce Australia's long-term costs as well as improve lives abroad. Many people may ask why we should be increasing it. It is because we would be spending our own money to help others whom we do not necessarily know. I think this would have great long-term effects on Australia.

Mr XING (Haileybury) — I would like to talk about something which has been raised quite a bit in today's discussion — the question of the economic sustainability of the budget and the measures that we supposedly need to put in place, such as the \$7 GP co-payment, in order to keep the budget sustainable. I would like to talk about economic sustainability from the perspective of social mobility. I contend that the measures outlined in the Abbott government's budget serve to degrade social mobility and make it more difficult for those at the bottom level of society to ascend. The budget does this by making it more difficult for them to find work. By degrading social mobility the budget makes it more difficult for these people to contribute to society in the long term, which leads to more underlying social issues. I contend that in the long term that the degradation of social mobility by this budget makes for an unsustainable situation.

Ms STRETTON (Glen Waverley Secondary College) — I will also be addressing the topic of foreign aid. At present Australia contributes 0.37 per cent of its annual spending to foreign aid, when we have agreed that we would try to increase this amount to 0.7 per cent, which is still very low. Other OECD countries have well exceeded 0.7 per cent. We should invest in foreign aid because this would help to foster security for Australia. If we can help countries to have effective governance, we will reduce the risk of conflicts breaking out thereby affecting Australians in this country. Australians are really lucky. One hundred per cent of our population has access to safe water and sanitation compared to a country like Afghanistan which has only 22 per cent access. That is appalling.

Mr COLLIER (McKinnon Secondary College) — I want to talk about CSIRO funding. Amongst the international community the Abbott government's proposed cuts to the CSIRO are quickly establishing Australia as a nation that does not regard science as being important. The CSIRO is perhaps Australia's greatest means of research into issues such as Ebola and climate change, which are arguably two of the biggest threats to our way of life. Along with this, cuts to renewable energy are further harming our efforts to combat climate change. As a nation we should aspire to be more like Germany, which has the highest saturation of wind farms in the world.

Mr CAMERON (The Peninsula School) — I liken the budget crisis to buying a house. Initially you are in debt, but that does not mean that you cut out necessities like eating, drinking and sending your children to school. When you liken that to the budget crisis, it is okay that you are in debt to start with. It does not mean you cut necessities, such as health care, welfare and education. We need to look forward to sustainability, not cut necessities.

Mr A. TRAN (The Peninsula School) — I believe the budget is going in the wrong direction. To fix the budget problems we currently face, instead of decreasing spending we should increase taxation and better manage our expenditure. Our government spending represents a significant kind of investment in our society, which is fundamental to a capitalist society. That being said, we must also facilitate the sustainability of our investment. As an example, investments should be made in green energy development, which is a more promising and longer term solution to our energy crisis than fossil fuel.

In regard to the cuts in defence suggested by so many here, I believe in a philosophy called peace through strength, which focuses on deterrence, making sure that if we go to war, we will win.

Mr MUEHLEISEN (John Monash Science School) — Throughout today we have been talking about the positives and the negatives and what is the best path to take with the budget moving forward. To answer the issue of the budget we need to fundamentally ask ourselves what we should represent with our budget. I think it should represent the values that we as a society agree upon. Among them I think the idea of a fair go — an idea we have all heard about either from someone else or from reading through the booklet — is an idea that we all need to espouse.

In reaching this budget we need to ask ourselves whether it will meet this idea of a fair go, equality and egalitarianism. We need to ask ourselves whether it will support these ideas and bring us forward in reaching our aim or whether it will go against it. I would like to say more, but I am out of time.

Mr GORADIA (Scotch College Melbourne) — I would like to advocate the proposal to privatise the higher education system. Before I get labelled as a right-wing fascist I would like to enlighten you all. You may say that this private business incentive may force the lower socio-economic echelon of our society out of the education system, but this same business incentive will not allow the private education companies to set fees so high that this whole sector is completely ignored. The people who do not already go to TAFE and university under the current system will not go anyway under any type of reform.

You may say that education is a human right, that everybody should be able to get it and that privatisation goes against this. But what about water and utilities? They have all been privatised — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Mr MacCUSPIE (Camberwell Grammar School) — One issue I believe has been overlooked in the discussion today is that of asylum seekers and refugees. In the notes from our meeting we mentioned that we wished to cut money from Operation Sovereign Borders. I would also wish to propose that perhaps some offshore processing and mandatory detention would cease. Not only would this improve Australia's standing as a human rights champion and get it back to its previous standard, it would also stand to save significant amounts of money. Processing people offshore currently costs \$100 000 per person, per process. This is a huge amount of money. If we process them onshore or even if we just did not put them in mandatory detention, we could stand to gain a lot of money which could be redirected to resettling them and to improving foreign aid for the countries from which they come to target the issues from which these refugees flee in the first place.

Ms STENTS (Genazzano FCJ College) — Although it may be controversial, I feel as though we should be fixing solutions in our own backyard, so to speak, before we send funds overseas by way of international aid. I think payments should be subject to the economic capacity of Australia, and this is somewhere where we can cut funds to put back towards the budget. A small percentage of the budget should be allocated to foreign aid each year — smaller than what we have got at the moment. Should the need arise, and only if it is necessary, unspent money could be returned to the budget.

Australia cannot promise any amount to other countries and should not be legally bound or obliged to do so. Any amount provided should be subject to change and at the mercy of the Australian government. We do not

have to cut our foreign aid completely; I am not of that opinion. We can expect some backlash from the international stage, but Australia needs to — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Mr AL-SALIHI (Camberwell Grammar School) — The opposition has just spoken about the fact that they want to decrease the current level of foreign aid. The foreign aid level right now is below 1 per cent of our GDP. The fact is, as spoken by Jasper from my school, through Operation Sovereign Borders and through decreasing our foreign aid budget we are sending out a message to the rest of the world on the international stage that Australia no longer upholds its UN-bound responsibility to serve those nations that are developing and underdeveloped.

Australia as a developed nation and as one of the economic and political powerhouses of the world needs to pick up the slack and work towards making the world a more habitable place. It should help other nations, as is its responsibility as an economic powerhouse.

Mr SHEMMELL (Kingswood College) — I will also talk on the topic of foreign aid. It is true that we need to continue foreign aid, and we may need to increase it, but I think first we need to come up with the criteria that classifies whether or not aid is necessary after a specific crisis.

We need to make sure, for example, if it is a natural disaster of a certain level, that we send a certain amount of aid. We need to send it quickly, and we need to do it without being asked. We also need to discuss the length of time we need to continue this aid for. If there is a disaster in a country and we continue aid for an excessively long period of time, it is just a drain on funds that could be directed to other countries for different types of aid work.

Ms TEMOS (MacKillop College Werribee) — How do I put this? It is debatable whether we are in a budget crisis or we are not. It is debatable, and I think that is an issue. It should be a definitive thing. Either it is true or it is not; either we are in a crisis or we are not. It is evident that political jargon is laced throughout the statistics in order to favour either side. Either it is true or it is false.

Average Australians are not going to understand the meaning of ‘GDP 10 per cent’. They will think, ‘Oh, it’s a solid number; let’s go for that. Yep, sounds good’. They do not understand what that means — let’s be real.

The CHAIR — Have you been watching television?

Ms TEMOS — They watch television — that is the thing. That is where they get their information from. It is a democracy. We need to get people to understand what exactly we are talking about before we start working towards a solution.

Mr O’BRIEN (Scotch College Melbourne) — Today we have clearly seen a dichotomy presented. We have seen that we can have a high standard of living either through cutting spending or through raising taxes. I am here today to say that we can have both. We can maintain a high standard of living without having a massive deficit or causing massive harm to our community. How do we do this? We do this by backing right-wing economics.

Right-wing economics is something that has not been educated about recently. It has been in the past. We have seen throughout the 1980s and the 1990s a very literate electorate, which has known about these sorts of concepts. And we have seen the benefits: when people spend money in these areas, we can get good social outcomes. Think of stuff like research, for example: if we spend money on research, privately or non-privately, we get outcomes like Wi-Fi. Look at the benefits that Wi-Fi has had for our society, for Australia. Look at things like when we invest money in infrastructure, the number of jobs created and the benefits to ourselves. Clearly we need to maintain what we are doing and our current status — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Ms BOLT (St Catherine’s School) — There has been a lot of talk today to the effect that making university admission prices much higher will deter people from wanting to seek a higher education. I just do not believe that that is quite true. If you look at the United States of America, college fees are through-the-roof expensive — around 40 000 to 50 000 dollars — yet 96 per cent of people in America have a college degree. So

I do not necessarily think that having higher university fees is going to deter people, if we look at the United States. It does have a lot of people in college getting those degrees so they can then pursue higher jobs.

Mr ZATTRA (John Paul College) — Further responding to the issue about foreign aid, I believe the problem is not how much or how little we give to other countries but where we spend our foreign aid and who we give it to. For example, China still receives some of our foreign aid — a country that is confident and can produce its own stable and strong economy. However, we still give foreign aid to this country, when it could be better spent on countries such as countries in Africa suffering from the Ebola virus or countries that are devastated and ravaged by natural disasters, such as the Philippines, which is still recovering from the flood and tsunami it had last year.

I further believe that if we relocate this money and it is better spent, there will be no further need for a change of foreign aid. It just needs to be allocated better to countries that need it more.

Ms SHANAHAN (Sunbury College) — I just wanted to say that if the fees at unis and TAFEs go up I think it will be a deterrent. Personally I know, from being in year 11 and 12 and doing VCE and looking at universities, that it would be. Some students have single parents; they cannot get loans. If you do not know what you want to do but you still want a degree under your belt, it is really difficult to decide what you want, especially at such a young age. Having to choose while knowing that it is going to be a lot of money even if it is not what you are going to do is going to prevent you from your choices.

Ms PEREIRA (Genazzano FCJ College) — I agree with the position that increasing taxation is also going to be a deterrent to encouraging our economy to flourish. I think the key thing here is to encourage spending within businesses within Australia and Australian-owned businesses to encourage the economy to strengthen and to eventually alleviate our debt position. I think increasing taxation is only going to make people in the position of having money become more stingy and more aware of saving, and it is not going to really encourage our economy to flourish.

Mr CHOONG (Camberwell Grammar School) — When it comes to problems, surely it is better to prevent them than to treat them. In this way, we can look at the main issues in society — for example, obesity, alcoholism, homelessness and other issues that plague the healthcare system and social welfare.

Surely it would make more sense to put more money into education to help people to understand issues that may arise from things such as excessive drinking or cigarettes. What I want to know is, what gives someone like Christopher Pyne the jurisdiction or the justification to say that we do not need more money in our education system, we need better trained teachers? I would like to pose this question to him: how do you intend to train better teachers, to build better facilities or to provide better opportunities for Australians like us without putting more money into the education system?

The CHAIR — I am sorry, but that is it. Thank you so much; your contributions were fantastic. I wish we could go on for another hour. I always feel embarrassment, when I point to you, that I do not know your names. It is very hard; I would normally say the member's name.

THE VOTE

The CHAIR — We are moving to the vote. The first vote we are going to have will be on the Australian budget crisis, but I will tell you how it works. We will decide on the voices. I will say the 'ayes' first and then the 'noes', and I will decide which side has won on the volume of the voices. If anyone challenges my decision, we will have to go to a physical vote.

The purpose of this vote is to determine your position on the proposition:

That Australia is in a 'budget crisis' and all Australians must share the burden — directly and indirectly.

Question defeated.

The CHAIR — Now we come to the 10 groups and whether or not we endorse their propositions. We have tried to edit these.

Group 1

The CHAIR — The question is:

That the current budget is not in crisis. We agree to keep the current level of budget deficit to promote long-term growth by focusing on social services in lieu of spending on external defence, the introduction of a carbon tax and closing tax loopholes.

Question agreed to.

Group 2

The CHAIR — The proposal is:

That the money we would save in cutting private school funding should be collected in an education trust which supports local public schools and grants equal opportunity, scholarships and financial assistance to students who would otherwise be unable to access university due to socio-economic status. Our proposal seeks to redistribute government funds more equally in education so that all Australians can have a fair go.

Question agreed to.

Group 3

The CHAIR — We have precised this question. The question is:

That members feel that there should be that balance towards a sustainability of Medicare as well as providing sufficient funds for the present generation. Most members believe there should not be a co-payment.

Question agreed to.

Group 4

The CHAIR — The question is:

That the natural disaster or severe conflict response plan be a response plan to any international global disaster to which Australia is obliged to supply aid. This could be formulated in the way of a fund to which the government allocates money. This plan would detail whether or not Australia should step in and supply aid and how long after the incident aid should continue for. This response plan should cut unnecessary expenditure.

Question agreed to.

Group 5

The CHAIR — The question is:

That the government must not remove money from health, education, social welfare, foreign aid and climate change while accepting the necessity of essential services over budget surplus and looking for avenues of savings in defence and greater taxation to high-income earners and the private sector, with an emphasis on corporations based overseas.

I am a little bit lost.

Mr FIFORD — Essentially it is keeping everything but cutting expenditure in defence and making high-income earners and overseas corporations pay higher tax to get the commensurate savings.

Delegates divided on question.

Question agreed to.

Group 6

The CHAIR — The question before the house is:

That foreign aid be redirected to more apt international issues, that investments be made into sustainable industries, that there be no floating of Medicare but keeping co-payments and that tertiary education be privatised.

Question defeated.

Group 7

The CHAIR — The proposal is:

That climate change is a real issue and we hope to solve it and decrease its impact by increasing funding to research groups and encouraging renewable sources of energy through financial incentives. Lastly, we will divert funds from the military as we feel Australia is currently insulated from security threats due to our advanced technology as well as regional treaties such as ANZUS.

Delegates divided on question.

Mr SPARSH — Can I ask for clarification?

The CHAIR — Of course you may.

Mr SPARSH — Where is the money being cut from defence going to?

The CHAIR — No, we cannot have questions like that during a division. It is not allowed.

Mr SPARSH — That is not specified.

Question agreed to.

Group 8

The CHAIR — The proposal is:

That, with spending on education health and welfare, there need to be cuts to defence and foreign aid. With foreign aid, we need to prioritise where the money is being spent. Both debt and spending should be fair for all. All Australians should share the burden, but equitably. We also need to privatise Qantas Airways.

You might agree with one and disagree with the other, but anyway. The question is:

That the question be agreed to.

Delegates divided on question.

Question defeated.

Group 9

The CHAIR — Group 9's question is:

That we focus on increasing revenue by new taxes and increasing expenditure.

Question defeated.

Group 10

The CHAIR — Group 10 proposes:

That, to combat the unsustainable reallocation of taxpayers money, we should include tightening of the super tax and more incentives for negative gearing for social gains, invest in climate change internationally and ensure that there are no tax loopholes to ensure taxes are paid and cut mining subsidies.

Does anyone seek clarification on that proposition?

A delegate — Yes.

The CHAIR — So do I. Did you write it, James?

Mr FIFORD — No, I just selected it from a range. It was tough.

The CHAIR — There is more than one question in it.

Mr FIFORD — Let us say ‘to minimise the tax loopholes and to cut mining subsidies that are extended to large mining corporations’.

Question agreed to.

2014 NATIONAL SCHOOLS CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

The CHAIR — The next item is the report on the 2014 National Schools Constitutional Convention. I call on Ingrid Mao from St Catherine’s School. Ingrid attended the national convention in Canberra in March. She will give an overview of the 2014 event and speak about her experiences.

Ms MAO — Thank you very much for the introduction, Chair, and for this opportunity to stand before the state constitutional convention today.

Firstly I thank Social Education Victoria for giving young Victorians, like me and many others assembled here today, a platform from which to launch a parliamentary-style debate whereby diverse shades of political opinion may be expressed and heard. It was exactly a year ago that I was sitting here in the front row waiting very nervously for my name and the name of school to be called out to give a speech on Australia’s democracy. Although a year has passed, it is with the same feeling that I stand here today to share my experience of the national schools constitutional convention held in Canberra in early March.

This year’s focus was on federalism, specifically on health and the distribution of water. I remember getting very involved into the research process and even consulting my politics and history teacher on extra reading materials on the issues. At that moment you could say that I was focused solely on the academic perspective of the convention. However, the national convention really began for me on our departure from Melbourne Airport. It began with awkward greetings and introductions to wonderful people who, at the time, I did not think that I would become friends with and with whom I remain friends today. Everyone was a little nervous, yet the group departed from Melbourne Airport with an ample supply of enthusiasm and excitement at the idea of participating in national debates not only in the old Parliament House in Canberra but also in discussions with our national leaders.

I remember one boy from Northcote High School who even travelled with a pocket edition of the constitution in his blazer. That was a whole new level of passion and enthusiasm, henceforth I knew that the social dynamics and diversity of participating students would be an amazing and unforgettable aspect of the opportunity.

On landing in Canberra I felt surprisingly energised after the short flight during which I got to know my fellow Victorians. We were met by over 100 other delegates from all over Australia. The introductions began there. I do not think that I have ever introduced myself to so many people in such a short period of time. I got to know some delegates better than others, which is probably one of the few regrets of attending the convention. I also wish that the convention could have been held over several days. I remember one group of girls coming up to us and introducing themselves as delegates from the ‘sunniest state in Australia’. It took me a moment to realise that they were referring to Queensland.

There were moments when we all engaged in serious debates and stood firmly for our beliefs on certain political ideologies that are dear to our hearts, but there were also times when we took on the role of embracing and assuming strong personalities in mock debates during which humour and joy filled the parliamentary chamber. Delegates delivered jaw-dropping speeches that surpassed any theatrical performances I have witnessed thus far.

Over the course of two days we visited the National Archives of Australia and Old Parliament House, and we enjoyed dinner at the High Court of Australia. We were also addressed by numerous politicians, by professors of political science and by Madam Speaker of the House of Representatives, who welcomed us on behalf of Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

On the last night I finished some late-night revision for my Revolution SAC schedule the next day. I wrote to my teacher in Melbourne and reflected on my experience. I wrote of how incredibly sad it was to think that by that time the next day the convention would be over and that perhaps I would have already bid my farewells to all the friends I had made on the trip, some of whom are sitting in this convention today.

I feel very honoured to have been invited back today to share my experience in Canberra. What I have shared is merely a portion of my amazing time at the national convention and in some ways does not do it justice, as it is extremely hard to summarise everything in a single speech. Nonetheless, I have no doubt that the 2014 National Schools Constitutional Convention has been one of the most rewarding opportunities I have ever received. I recommend without hesitation to anyone who has the opportunity to attend a national schools constitutional convention to do so.

Finally, I acknowledge the fact that neither the national schools constitutional convention nor the state convention today would have been possible without the amazing organisation of the education department and the people who have worked relentlessly behind the scenes to organise this event.

Ladies and gentlemen, while we do not pretend that our system of democracy is without flaws, I cannot emphasise enough how fortunate we are to have every opportunity to contribute to national debates and to be part of democracy in action. In effect our presence here today is the clearest evidence of our democracy. As young Australians we should be passionate about the opportunity we have been given. We are voicing our opinions without fear or favour, safe in the knowledge that in our country we are allowed and encouraged to speak freely and that that right is enshrined in our constitution. We must not take this for granted.

Delegates, please join me in giving thanks to Mrs Christine Fyffe, the education department and Social Education Victoria for their efforts in supporting and organising such a wonderful and successful event today. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Ingrid, for that report. It is terrific to know you enjoyed it so much. Delegates, there is an application form for the national convention in your information packs.

CLOSING

The CHAIR — We are now moving towards the end of our day, and it is my pleasure to introduce to you Colin Brooks. Colin is the member for Bundoora in the Legislative Assembly and the shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Education. He is going to officially close the day. He has been the member for Bundoora since 2006. He serves on the Parliament's Education and Training Committee and has previously been a member of the Parliament's Law Reform Committee and the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. Before coming into Parliament Colin was a councillor at the City of Banyule and also the mayor of Banyule — I did not know that about you; there you are. Delegates, Colin Brooks.

Delegates applauding.

Mr BROOKS — First of all, thank you very much to the organisers and to all of you for giving me the honour of coming here today to close this fantastic constitutional convention. It is a great honour. I had the chance to speak at a similar event last year. I was able to sit at the back then and just listen to the close of this conference and to some of the debates, the reports put forward and to watch the votes. While I have not been here all day because I had so many other things to do with an election looming, it is so obvious from listening to those sessions that you have put in a great deal of thought and carefully constructed your arguments and positions on these issues.

What I want to say today flows pretty much along the same lines as we have just heard from Ingrid. I want to start by talking a little about my own path into this place, and I will explain why after have done that. I grew up in a household where we did not talk about politics that much, but we talked about things that were happening on the news and in our local community, so there was a level of discussion about values. I did not really enjoy school that much — high school in particular — and I regret to say now that I left school in year 10 to take up a trade. I became an electrician; I worked on the railways and I worked on building sites and a range of other employment areas in the electrical trades field.

In the 1990s, when I was in my early 20s, I became very concerned about the direction of my local council. They were tendering out some services that impacted upon older people and young mums. I decided that I should run for council, even though I had doubts about my own ability to run the council. I had never thought about running for council before and did not know what councillors did; I just knew that the services that people

relied on were really important and I wanted to see them repaired — put back to the way they were. So I ran for council. My opponent was someone who had been on the council for a long time previously. He was the shire president and he seemed to know everybody, so I thought I would have no chance of winning. But I worked hard, wore out a couple of pairs of shoes knocking on doors and putting leaflets in letterboxes, and I was surprised to find on election day that I got elected quite overwhelmingly.

What I learnt from that was my first big, important political lesson: if you have a go and put yourself forward, and people agree with your position, they will give you a go. You sometimes do not think they will, but the electorate will give you a go. You are all here today because you put yourselves forward to come to this convention, so I wanted to congratulate you on that. You put yourselves forward. You did not have to be here today; you have chosen to apply to come here today. I think that is a great thing that you should all be commended on.

I particularly refer to the fact that we are in this great building today — a building that is steeped in not just our state's history but also our nation's history. As many of you might know, this was the federal Parliament from our federation in 1901 to 1927. When you think about some of the people who have sat in this chamber and some of the decisions that have been made in this chamber, it is quite remarkable. Our first prime ministers, Edmund Barton and Alfred Deakin — the architects, if you like, of our constitution and our federation — sat just here. And Billy Hughes, through the First World War, with those massive debates about conscription that divided the nation and split the Labor Party — those debates took place in this chamber. Great premiers — Premiers Bolte, Hamer, Kennett and Bracks in the more modern era — governed from this chamber. One of my predecessors from my community of Greensborough, Pauline Toner, was the first woman to smash the political glass ceiling here in Victoria by becoming the first woman cabinet minister — in relatively recent history, surprisingly. This chamber is full of that history. It is full of people who have put themselves forward — people who did not sit back. They took the opportunities that they had been given to contribute to our democracy.

I suppose my message today as you leave this place after what I hope was a very special day is about how you might in the future continue to put yourself forward and contribute to our democracy, because in the future when people look back at the history of your generation, when they think about people who made a mark, people who contributed, why should they not they read your names in the history books of your generation? I think it is really important that you consider how you might contribute to our wonderful democracy here in Victoria. Most of all, I hope you have had a great day, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to officially close this constitutional convention.

The CHAIR — Colin, thank you very, very much for coming.

Mr BROOKS — Thanks, Christine.

Delegates applauding.

The CHAIR — Now it is time for me to say thank you to Hansard — I hope that everything has been clear to reporters. They will make your speeches sound absolutely fantastic. I want to thank all of you. It has been a very enjoyable day for me. It has been rather stressful, as you can imagine, being the Speaker in this house, and it has given me new hope about what is going to come forward. Do not stop caring, keep being passionate about things and speak out. Even if other people disagree with you, stand up for what you believe in, because change begins with those first few words. Thank you so much for making my day so great. Thank you for being so polite; I think I will get a video of today's proceedings to show my parliamentary colleagues when they come back how they should listen to other people's speeches. Thank you very much.

Delegates applauding.

Convention adjourned 2.52 p.m.